

Nathan Johnstone

THE NEW  
ATHEISM,  
MYTH, AND  
history

The Black Legends  
of Contemporary  
Anti-Religion



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*For Jackie Eales*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAG	A. C. Grayling, <i>Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and An Essay on Kindness</i> (London: Oberon Books, 2007)
AMfCA	Peter Boghossian, <i>A Manual for Creating Atheists</i> (Durham: Pitchstone, 2013)
AWNtCotH	Hector Avelos, 'Atheism Was Not the Cause of the Holocaust', in Loftus, J. W. (ed.), <i>The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails</i> (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010)
BtS	Daniel C. Dennet, <i>Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon</i> (London: Penguin, 2007)
FW	Hector Avelos, <i>Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence</i> (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005)
GatA	Victor Stenger, <i>God and the Atom. From Democritus to the Higgs Boson: The Story of a Triumphant Idea</i> (Amherst: Prometheus, 2013)
GatFoF	Victor Stenger, <i>God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion</i> (Amherst: Prometheus, 2012)
GiNG	Christopher Hitchens, <i>God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything</i> (London: Atlantic Books, 2008)
IDoA	Michel Onfray, <i>In Defence of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam</i> , trans. J. Leggatt (London: Serpent's Tail, 2007)
TEoF	Sam Harris, <i>The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason</i> (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004)
TGA	A. C. Grayling, <i>The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism</i> (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)
TGD	Richard Dawkins, <i>The God Delusion</i> (London: Black Swan, 2007)

TGV	Darrel W. Ray, <i>The God Virus: How Religion Infects Our Lives and Culture</i> (Boner Springs: IPC Press, 2009)
TNA	Victor Stenger, <i>The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason</i> (Amherst: Prometheus, 2009)
TPA	Christopher Hitchens (ed.), <i>The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever</i> (London: Da Capo Press, 2007)
TtL	A. C. Grayling, <i>Towards the Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights that Made the Modern West</i> (London: Bloomsbury, 2007)
UtR	Richard Dawkins, <i>Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Popular Appetite for Wonder</i> (London: Penguin, 1999)
WiG	A. C. Grayling, <i>What is Good?: The Search for the Best Way to Live</i> (London: Phoenix, 2004)



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: History and the New Atheism

What does it mean to live ‘in the shadow of God’? In his book, *The End of Faith*, the neuroscientist and anti-religious campaigner, Sam Harris, instructs us: to understand, look to history.

Look to the medieval Inquisition which systematically tortured and murdered vast numbers of people simply for doubting the Christian scriptures, or for the crime of being Jewish, or because they were believed capable of witchcraft. Look to the Holocaust: six million dead because of a religious hatred ingrained so deeply into European society that it poisoned even the secular cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Look to history and understand that in the shadow of God resides ignorance and fear, hatred and oppression, violence and the implacable will to destroy on the basis only of what one *thinks*, but does not know, about the world.<sup>1</sup>

To many secularists such an argument requires little more than an agreeing nod of the head. The image of the deranged inquisitor, or of the innocent ‘witch’ burning at the stake, are so fixed in our culture that we need only a single word to trigger a cascade of associations and moral judgements. Harris is elaborating upon a truth that we believe we already know. If we are surprised momentarily by his juxtaposition of the Holocaust with the Inquisition, he need only remind us that without religion there would be no Jews to murder, and that the pursuit of a racial utopia was an act pure unreasoning faith. It takes a mind (mis) shaped by the intellectual habits of religion to believe totalitarianism’s ‘outlandish dogmas...working ineluctably like the gears of some ludicrous instrument of death.’<sup>2</sup>

But beneath the apparent familiarity this is, in fact, a remarkably assertive use of history. The Inquisition and the Holocaust, Harris explains, allow him to ‘intimate, in as concise a manner as possible, some of the terrible consequences that have arisen, *logically and inevitably*, out of Christian faith.’<sup>3</sup> Religion’s drive towards the ‘depths of human depravity’ is innate, inescapable and unparalleled. It is history that records the crimes perpetrated when faith was the dominant cultural force. It is history, then, that shows us religion in its natural state, not only what it *can* be, but what it *will* be unless acted on by some external restraining influence. We see what fundamentalism is, and what lurks within ‘moderate’ faith. The God debate is conceptualised as a literal battle between past and present, between a modernist secularism striving to fulfil humanity’s potential for rational progress and the leaden anachronism of the supernatural, philosophically impotent but still wielding enormous power. Understand Islam, then, ‘as though a portal in time has opened, and fourteenth-century hordes are pouring into our world.’<sup>4</sup> Harris’ language is often the most intemperate of the ‘New Atheists’, but his sense of history, of religion *as history*, and of its polluting the present, is quite typical.

What is also remarkable, then, given the scale of the historical claims being made here on their behalf, is how few secularists have seriously asked whether Harris or his colleagues are right.

### A QUESTION ONLY FOR SCIENCE?

Harris’ book, along with others written by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Victor Stenger, would introduce the ‘New Atheism.’<sup>5</sup> It was greeted by many secularists as an encouragingly militant rejection of the cultural dominance of faith, and one that was long overdue. With the ensuing media ‘God debate’, and with the unprecedented growth of anti-religionism online, the position has become the most prevalent current expression of opposition to religion in North America and Great Britain. Yet, whilst objections to the New Atheism have been raised by non-believers, extensive and sustained investigations of many of its arguments remain rare, and a number of its most striking claims all but untested. This book is one such study, examining specifically the use—and, I will conclude, the misuse—of history in New Atheist polemic.

My emphasis might at first appear strange. The immediate impression taken from the New Atheists will likely be that their overriding concern

is to subject religious belief to the negative scrutiny of science. The New Atheism, it would appear, rehearses and extends the contest between science and theology over where resides the most trustworthy base for our knowledge of the world and of our place within it. Science is to be imposed as the benchmark by which theological claims are to be conceded any credibility, with the result that they are conceded none. The more social and cultural aspects of the debate will appear, if not strictly secondary, then at least consequential. It is the authority of science that the New Atheists claim for their attacks on religion and so it is as scientists, or as lay promoters and defenders of science, that they should be judged.

Such an impression is deceptive. Whilst understandable, the focus of the God debate on scientific naturalism and justifications for belief has overshadowed the fact that much of the New Atheist critique of religion is actually based in areas such as politics, sociology, ethics, philosophy, cultural studies, education, criminology, literature and, of course, history. If science provides the yardstick for determining the extent of religion's factual inaccuracy, it is here that evidence will be found for the ways in which such false beliefs affect our lives. Politics, for instance, will chart the terrible artificiality of conflicts over 'sacred' space and 'holy' law. Sociology will show the oppression that results from giving the status of holy writ to castes, and to hierarchies of gender and sexuality. Ethics will expose the emptiness of claims that religion makes us more moral, criminology that it makes us more law-abiding, and both will reveal that such accolades ought properly to go to rationalist humanism and the secular communities it inspires.

In short, when the New Atheists turn their attention to making their case for the societal malevolence of religion, they turn from science to the humanities.

This is far from a secondary concern. For despite the New Atheists being able to communicate a sense that belief without scientific evidence is an offence to human dignity and a crisis in itself, it is the claim that such beliefs have uniquely destructive personal, social and even global consequences that gives their polemic a more convincing urgency.

Consider Harris' 'dangerous idea', offered to the *Edge* web-salon in 2006, that atheistic intolerance should be the duty of every scientist. He assures us that the relationship between science and religion is '(very nearly) zero-sum', and so our neighbours simply cannot be left to choose to believe that Jesus was born of a virgin or that Muhammad flew to

heaven on a winged horse. Scientists must take these ‘hallowed travesties’ from believers, must lay claim themselves to the real experience of the transcendent (‘non-ordinary states of consciousness’) and wrest from religion the human need for ceremony, that we might mark out the profound moments in our lives ‘without lying to ourselves about the nature of reality.’<sup>6</sup>

Yet if the issue really were only virgin births and flying horses even those of us moved by the scientist’s *cri de coeur* might find the call to a cultural war over such things difficult to stomach. Would we not perhaps think the level of Harris’ belligerence to be disproportionate? Our impatience with supernaturalism is unlikely to move many of us to enlist in his campaign of proactive intolerance, because, as he tacitly admits, for most of us it is an irritation only, however keenly felt. But what might motivate us is the fear of the most extreme religious views gaining political and military power. The issue ceases to be one that can be met with detached perplexity when Harris can offer us, as he does here, images of theocrats banning life-saving medical research, of future US presidents making foreign policy with an eye to the End-Times and of jihadists armed with nuclear weapons. These, he assures us, are the inevitable consequences of allowing basic, even apparently inconsequential supernaturalism to go unchallenged.<sup>7</sup>

The same technique shapes even the more positive expressions of New Atheism. In the opening to *The God Delusion* (2006) Richard Dawkins explains that the book’s purpose is to help faltering believers ‘break free’ of religion and so access a more enriched relationship with the world. He will guide them in abandoning the undignified mental habits that shield their faith from sceptical investigation and induct them into the better habit of scientific reasoning. They will gain ‘enlightenment’, here defined as the liberation from the ‘illusion of design’ in nature, and the chance to revel instead in the ‘devastating elegance’ of Darwinism. If, as he hopes, the believer who picks up his book puts it down as an atheist, they should feel only ‘pride’ in their achievement. Dawkins even offers the attainment of his philosophy as a diagnostic of mental strength and well-being, since ‘atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind.’<sup>8</sup>

Without doubting his sincerity, it is again difficult not to suspect that Dawkins’ rhetoric of emancipation, ‘consciousness-raising’ and aspirational atheism would feel somewhat overblown were it not accompanied by the standard litany of religious crimes to up the stakes. Before setting

out his liberating arguments he makes sure to legitimate the concerns of those wavering believers (and, of course, us) who are ‘worried about the evils done in [religion’s] name’:

Imagine with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as Christ-killers, no Northern Ireland ‘troubles’, no honour killings, no shiny-suited bouffant-haired tel-evangelists fleecing gullible people of their money...Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it.<sup>9</sup>

Imagine instead the same preface without this paragraph. Would Dawkins’ idealistic prose not read like a rather eccentric scientific self-help manual were it not for these reminders of religious malevolence to give his mission a more tangible sense of moral crisis and a logic of self-defence?

## VIRTUOUS EVIDENTIALISM: EXPLORERS AND HUNTER-GATHERERS

My point is not to suggest that the social issues the New Atheists link to their scientific advocacy are not real, or the connection unjustified. Quite the opposite. It would be perverse for any historian to deny the role of faith in normalising forms of oppression on the basis of claims to divine ordinance, and in producing some of the worst atrocities in the human record. Nor could many historians, I think, accept the ‘bad apples’ defence so often offered by theists who suggest that blame rests not with religion itself but only with the moral failings of individuals who claim to act in its name.

Instead my objection is that, relying so heavily on advertising the negative social and cultural effects of faith, the New Atheists are cavalier regarding the disciplines that seek to understand how such effects occur. They reserve for themselves the right to be arbiters of others’ forays into the sciences, but apparently feel no accompanying reticence to dip into the humanities at will. The New Atheists tell us that they need no Ph.D. in theology to take on theologians. Their approach to other subjects is necessarily less combative, but in the end is not that much more respectful. It reveals, I think, an ironic discrepancy between what they claim for



themselves—and what they claim for us as secularists and humanists—and what they practise as polemicists.

What separates them from theists, the New Atheists claim, is their instinctive approach towards what can be known. Believers place faith over evidence. Indeed, whilst creationism claims to search for evidence of intelligent design, the faithful always reserve the right ultimately to believe in the absence of all justification, and even take pride in this. Atheists, it is stressed again and again, believe only in what can be proved or rationally deduced. Their virtue is evidentialism, and their evidentialism has the virtue of permanently opening their minds. Simultaneously their understanding of the world is anchored in what can be demonstrated or reasonably inferred whilst remaining humbly provisional. It has become something of a mantra for these polemicists to declare that they are ready to change their minds in the face of superior evidence or logic, and even to claim that the scientifically trained intellect delights in the exciting new possibilities gifted by the overturning of paradigms and orthodoxies.<sup>10</sup>

Yet these claims to virtuous evidentialism are belied by the New Atheists' polemical use of the humanities, in which they make arguments based often on only the most superficial engagement with work in the relative field. This work is not treated as a resource for better understanding, much less as a body of learning through which one might find the world more nuanced than one thought. When the New Atheists range beyond their specialisms it is not as explorers open to being changed by what they might find, but as hunter-gatherers who know already what they mean to take. Their attitude is proprietorial,<sup>11</sup> and the humanities are treated as a grab-bag from which to seize examples of the peculiar malefaction of believers. That which appears to challenge the ubiquity of religious malevolence, or which suggests deeper complexities of motivation and context, remains uninvestigated. Such ideological selectivity is an obvious rejection of evidentialism in practice, but the New Atheist attitude betrays a deeper cavalierism towards the principle. The standards they would demand with regard to the sciences are simply not considered necessary for the humanities.

This will be a source of irritation for the historian or the sociologist who follows the God debate, but for the secular humanist its significance ought to be greater. The New Atheists have attached moral authority to evidentialism and aggressively impose it as a standard by which the religious must be found wanting. But respect for the importance of rationalism and empiricism cannot be demanded if we ourselves practice

them only when it is convenient. It is certainly not the case that subjects should be left only to their specialists. But those who preach evidentialism, and presume superiority over others on that basis, forfeit the luxury of reading lightly. And if a would-be movement calling for societal change claims evidentialism as the basis of its greater insight, and so as the justification for its cultural authority and influence, the obligations on those who assert themselves as its leaders and guides would seem obvious.

### THE NEW ATHEISM AND HISTORY

Taken as a whole, the New Atheism identifies two competing traditions within the history of religion and its dissidents. First, religion is presented as universally malign, its fruits being subservience to superstition, the stifling of freethought and the promotion of genocidal violence. Second, New Atheists identify a counter-tradition of virtuous scepticism that, originating in Antiquity, and barely surviving the Christian and Islamic supremacies, was ultimately to coalesce and flourish in the Enlightenment's outright attack on superstition and in the unshackling of science.

The real significance of these traditions is that they can be used to suggest that religion and atheism are defined by opposing qualities that are perennial and in perpetual conflict. New Atheist history justifies the claim that contemporary religion is an anachronism that demonstrates only the medievalism of its adherents. Churches today, it warns, should be understood by the actions of their intolerant and murderous forebears, for the theology that drove the Inquisitions and the Crusades continues to inspire fundamentalist hate-speech and violence, and it lurks behind the euphoric hand-waving of the evangelicals and even the staid gentility of the Anglican parish church. By contrast, the New Atheists appoint themselves the heirs and guardians of the more noble rationalist tradition that has defined the 'true' values of humanism and secularism. So benign is atheism that it is innocent of any crime in human history and so, they conclude, is as innocent of any potential for the oppression of believers in the future.

In what follows, I show that both traditions are mythological, and the broader conclusions drawn from them unjustified. Moreover, historians have long understood this to be the case. They have rejected grand and simplifying narratives of the perpetual struggle between rationalism and faith, seeking instead to understand the beliefs of our ancestors in their

time and place—to engage with their nuances and trace their fluidity. The Church's role in persecution continues to be widely studied, but as a means to understand the complex interplay of politics and belief within highly specific social and economic contexts. It is not studied as a series of episodes in the unremitting addiction of the faithful to violence. As a result, mythologies such as those of the witch-hunts and the Inquisitions have long been exposed. Modern historians have all but abandoned concepts such as 'superstition' and 'mass-hysteria' as analytically meaningful, and they prefer to think in terms of the 'histories' rather than the 'history' of religion. These histories are very far from apologetics, but they militate strongly against casual assumptions as to the perenniality of the evils of faith and the virtues of atheism—a fact campaigning secularists would seem obligated to understand.

With regard to their own beliefs, the New Atheists deny outright histories that are inconvenient. Most notably, they dispute that atheists might have persecuted believers or that atheism itself could contain within it any logic for doing so. Yet both are realities unquestioned by historians. At the same time, their lack of a real understanding of cultural history prevents them from seeing how closely their own discourses mirror those found within religion—salvation through reason, the temptation to irrationalism, belief as heresy, the apostasy of former atheists. These frame a politics of inclusion and exclusion that mirrors the tribalism of religion and gives the lie to claims to that atheism naturally fosters an open community of freethinkers. An attention to history reveals that atheism is hardly as insulated from irrationalism, bigotry or violence as its 'New' advocates would like to believe. It allows us to objectively understand its negative potentials, rather than subjectively discount them.

## A DEFENCE OF HISTORY

Some now like to suggest that the New Atheist moment has passed, a conclusion that seems premature. Certainly, its press has become less habitually favourable and much casual interest appears to have waned. But the New Atheists maintain a strong media profile, and issues of public concern regularly arise in which anti-religion contributes an influential perspective. And, as many commentators have pointed out, the New Atheism cannot be assessed without reference to the numerous internet communities it has produced or exerts influence within. More widely, anti-religious militancy has become one of the languages of the

virtual world of forums, Facebook and Twitter—one of the very many languages, no doubt, but prominent nonetheless. Now that the New Atheism has ceased to be sensational, the question remains as to how far public expressions of radical anti-religion have become less immediately noticeable because they have become more normal.

This book is not a counter-polemic to the New Atheism. It takes no side in the God debate. It is, however, a critique of New Atheist polemical methods that raises questions as to their influence on non-religion more widely. It is a defence of history, and of the humanities in general, that highlights the dangers implicit in these becoming victims of selective evidentialism in an important public debate. As such it is a work of academic advocacy. The proper respect for the humanities will have to be integral to the survival of a non-religion more reasoning than that of the New Atheists—an informed non-religion in which the crimes of faith are considered proportionately, in which its darker ‘tendencies’ are properly contextualised and not simply reduced to stereotypes, and in which the negative potential of atheism is acknowledged by those who would strive thereby to ensure that it is never fulfilled. In short, a non-religion built on fact rather than myth.

\* \* \*

The term *New Atheists* was originally coined to describe three authors—Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*) and Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*)—whose books attacking religion, all published in a three-year period in the middle of the 2000s, appeared to signal a new militancy in atheism provoked by the attacks of 9/11. It was a negative appellation offered by a secularist who expressed himself disturbed by the irony of atheist fundamentalism and its ‘extremism in opposition to extremism.’<sup>12</sup> With the publication in 2007 of Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* and Victor Stenger’s *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, their names were commonly added to the list so that the term is now most often taken to refer to these five writers. But the anti-religious side of the God debate now encompasses many other protagonists so that we need to consider a wider body of literature to get a full sense of it. There are, of course, issues of definition here. Whilst there has been a certain measure of acceptance of the term, often those who support the position of Dawkins et al. do not explicitly label themselves as New Atheists. Yet there has

clearly been a very marked upsurge in the public advocacy of militant atheism, and the New Atheism seems as good a term as any to describe a cultural phenomenon the reality of which is undeniable.

In what follows I have adopted what I think is a reasonable, albeit broad, definition. I rank among the New Atheists those polemicists who go beyond only the defence of atheism as a legitimate viewpoint and the identification of harmful tendencies within religion. Instead, the New Atheists argue that religion is *defined* by its intellectual and social malevolence, and so advocate atheism as an imperative of societal change. This is to be pursued through proactive attacks on both faith-tenets and the supposed intellectual and moral incapacity of believers. Among New Atheists, then, I include writers such as A. C. Grayling, Michel Onfray, Hector Avelos, Peter Boghossian, Paul Tobin, Richard Carrier and Gregory Paul.<sup>13</sup> Other writers who contribute to the milieu of the criticism of faith, but have not (to my knowledge) combined this with the advocacy of aggressive atheism, are included under the broader category of *anti-religionism* (which, of course, includes New Atheism within it). Some authors, like Carl Sagan, are discussed because their work has been appropriated by the New Atheism, but the book does not suggest that they share its perspectives.<sup>14</sup>

Readers may well be surprised by the amount of space given in this book to discussing arguments sometimes made only briefly by the New Atheists. But the polemical weight of historical references in the God debate is not determined by the number of words allotted to them. In many cases the New Atheists rely on words like ‘Crusade’, ‘witch-hunt’ or ‘Northern Ireland’ to quickly summon up powerful pre-existing images in the mind of the reader. They do not elucidate because they believe they do not have to, and the real power of their history of perennial religious malevolence is in creating the impression that we already know it. A single reference to ‘the Inquisition’ is worth more than a chapter of exposés of previously unfamiliar religious brutalities. History is used precisely because of the efficiency of its impact. It takes far fewer words to give voice to myths than it does to untangle fact from fiction.

## NOTES

1. *TEoF*, chapter 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 79, 101.
3. *Ibid.*, 106, my emphasis.

4. Ibid., 107.
5. *TEoF*; *TGD*; *GiNG*; Sam Harris, *Letter to A Christian Nation* (London: Bantam Press, 2007); *BtS*; Victor Stenger, *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007).
6. Sam Harris, 'Science Must Destroy Religion', in John Brockman (ed.) *What Is Your Dangerous Idea?: Today's Leading Thinkers on the Unthinkable* (London, Sydney, New York and Toronto: Pocket Books, 2007), 150–153.
7. Ibid, 152.
8. *TGD*, 23–28.
9. Ibid., 23–24.
10. For example see *ibid.*, 320–321; *TNA*, 15.
11. For only the most overt and condescending expression of this, see *BtS*, 31–34.
12. Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers', *Wired* (November 2006). <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>.
13. For example, *AAG*; *TGA*; *IDoA*; *FW*; *AWNtCotH*, 368–395; Robert L. Park, *Superstition: Belief in the Age of Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
14. For example Sagan's, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

## Black Legends

For the New Atheists religion is the unrivalled societal evil. Faith, Christopher Hitchens declares, ‘poisons everything’, whilst for Sam Harris, ‘certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.’<sup>1</sup> Religion, they claim, is the foremost encourager of irrationality, bigotry, warfare, sexism, anti-science, medical retardation, educational negligence and the emotional and intellectual abuse of children. What religion is is to be seen in the terrible atrocities of its tribalism, in its stultifying social and moral conservatism, and in the oppressive weight of obligation and guilt with which believers artificially burden themselves.

History plays a key role in rationalising these conclusions. The New Atheists *know* that these things are the essence of religion because they *know* they are what religion has always been. The past shows them religion unshackled, when it defined the world untroubled by science or humanism, and subjugated men and women unopposed. In the words of Victor Stenger, it shows faith’s ‘unbroken history as a major source of the most horrible evils that the world has seen.’<sup>2</sup> When today the New Atheists encounter violent Islamism, or exploitative televangelists, or clerics slandering modern medicine, they need only ask how, within the supposedly antidotal conditions of modernity, the natural poison of religion can become so distilled?

We live, they tell us, with a uniquely powerful anachronism in our midst. Religion *is* history, a metaphysics and a morality from ‘the bawling and fearful infancy of our species’ (Hitchens). The religious themselves

have become the willing bearers of the past, carefully navigating it through the hostile terrain of the modern world. Sheer historical awkwardness is nowhere better demonstrated than in the continued influence of scripture. Believers yearn to obey instructions never intended for them, written by those to whom the issues of modern life would be inconceivable. The very nature of these injunctions betrays the profound ‘disconnect between scriptural and modern (one is tempted to say civilised) morals’ (Dawkins). Yet the religious demand that we, in turn, subjugate our ethics and our laws to the opinions of men whose moral instincts and level of knowledge about the world would today embarrass a child.<sup>3</sup>

The anachronism is not defined by age (many ancient philosophies are admirable, apparently), but by intellectual and moral dead-ends. Supernaturalism derived its credibility from the old mysteries of existence, such that ‘[t]hanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important’ (Hitchens).<sup>4</sup> Morally, it is also ‘very easy to give non-supernatural reasons for preferring honesty to lying, for outlawing murder and theft’ (Stenger).<sup>5</sup> In both areas religion has run its long course into obsolescence, ever giving less and less to human progress.<sup>6</sup> Worse still, religion has survived as a parasite on the modern world with the appalling potential to turn our achievements against us. ‘Faith-based fanatics could not design anything as useful or beautiful as a skyscraper or an aircraft’, Hitchens declares. Yet they can appropriate them for the purpose of ‘immolation and human sacrifice.’ Imagine, Harris demands, the absurd horror of a seventh-century holy warrior culture—jihad—gaining ‘the power of the atom.’<sup>7</sup>

So, Hitchens declares, we must battle against this alien past that threatens to overwhelm us, and ‘escape the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and the reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection.’<sup>8</sup>

Within this grand conceptualising of the God debate as the literal battle of past and present, the story of human civilisation is understood to show that the destructiveness of faith, and even the diminished moral capacity of believers, is perennial. An unedifying record of belief in action is offered to drive home the point. We have seen Harris direct our attention to the Inquisitions, the witch-hunt and anti-Semitism. These are cited widely by New Atheists, and to them are added the Crusades, sectarian conflict, the subjugation of women, colonialism, the slave trade, the North American and Amerindian ‘ethnocides’, death cults and human sacrifice, child abuse, censorship, the policing of sexuality and



the resistance to science—all testifying to the fact that whenever it has wielded real power religion has been the midwife of oppression and violence. It is hardly surprising, given the emphasis on the constant primacy of religious immorality in humanity's ethical failures that, as we have also seen, the crime often regarded as the greatest in history cannot be left out of the narrative. The Holocaust, almost all of the New Atheists agree, was Christian.

Through this history the case is made for understanding religion in terms of two predominating negative characteristics. The first is the power of faith to free people from the restraint that naturally comes from the need to base actions upon what can be proved or rationally deduced. 'Whenever a man imagines that he need only believe the truth of a proposition, without evidence—that unbelievers will go to hell, that Jews drink the blood of infants—he becomes capable of anything' (Harris).<sup>9</sup> Such excesses are merely the natural extension of the same habits of mind convincing the faithful that the absence of evidence for a divine creator ought to be no barrier to believing in one. The second is the instinct to turn this 'empty' metaphysical certainty into political absolutism. Religions have either persecuted on their own behalf or they have facilitated the tyranny of secular rulers who have been allowed to claim divine sanction for their actions. In their demand for complete mental and physical subjection, they have been history's most enduring form of 'totalitarianism.'

I use the term *perennial* to stress that the New Atheists are defining malevolence as more than only one potential of faith among many. Constantly exhibited, it is simply what religion is. The New Atheism actively eschews 'relativist' attempts to understand the development of fundamentalism and religious violence as manifesting in specific political and economic climates, arguing that to do so distracts attention from the dominant role played by belief itself. Destructiveness is not one characteristic that might emerge under certain conditions; it is religion's innate and unchanging nature, artificially contained at such times as it is deprived of power. Faith inclines to extremism. Political and social contexts determine only whether it will be allowed to follow that inclination. Unlike other critics, New Atheists do not want to argue that oppression is a *possibility* of religion but rather that, unless checked by some external force, it is an *inevitability*.

From this historical vantage point, modern fundamentalism need be explained only as an escape of natural religiosity from the constraints

imposed by modern secularism. By the same argument, religious moderation can be usefully dismissed as empty since it is only religion in an *unnatural* and disempowered state. It is, in A. C. Grayling's words, 'the perfumed smokescreen', a kind face 'turned to the world only when the Church is on the back foot.' If many of today's religious appear barely to resemble their forebears, we need ask only what external influence has restrained them? 'For whenever a religion is in the ascendant', Grayling declares, 'with hands on the levers of secular power too, it shows a very different face—the face presented by the Inquisition...' History shows us, then, what the re-empowerment of 'moderate' religion—its re-naturalisation—would mean.

Ultimately, such interpretations rest upon a basic flaw in historical understanding. History is seen as accumulative, a vertical process in which layers of the development of human society are placed on top of each other. What was once at the top, as the most discernible characteristic of society, becomes obscured and stifled by the weight of what accumulates on top of it in turn. Thus religion, once a new layer formed in the increasing complexity of early tribal societies, itself is overlaid by the even greater complexities of urbanisation, industrialisation, scientific advancement, and so on. Its sharpness is dulled, its qualities much more difficult to see clearly. Yet, if historians can peel those layers back, a pristine form of religion remains to be viewed and understood as malevolent. The fear the New Atheists want us to share is that the accumulated layers of civilisation might also be being stripped away in society at large. But if we must conceive of them at all (and most historians would be sceptical), we would need to understand these layers as liquid, bleeding into each other in a process of blending and mutual alteration. There has never been a pristine religion, unmixed with culture, politics and economics and so reducible to a set of immutable benign or malevolent characteristics.

The notion of perennial malevolence certainly has an impact, but it is historically invalid. That religion has often played a central part in generating conflict and supporting authoritarianism can hardly be denied, but the trend in historical research since at least the middle of the twentieth century has been the steady dismantling of the stereotypes upon which the New Atheists rely. The scale of victimisation has almost always been revised downward (sometimes very radically), and the sense of the ubiquity of psychological oppression in the pre-secular world has been

dissolved by far more sophisticated understandings of the wide variety of religious experiences. Historians have neither denied the dark side of religious history, nor have they downplayed the role of belief itself in creating the potential for violence. Instead, acute attention has been paid to the motivating power of individual beliefs (salvation, damnation, sacrament, sacred space, the demonic and so on) and the range of actions they might encourage. But such work has invariably shown that belief alone is an insufficient explanation for action and that understanding religious oppression requires a deep sensitivity to the complex mutual influence of faith tenets and socio-political factors. Decades of research now stress the need to approach the histories of religion in precisely the way refused by the New Atheists in their censure of the ‘relativism’ of contextualisation. The identification of a perennial malevolence by which religion—past and present—can be subjected to a single overarching judgement is not the understanding of faith through history. It is the abandonment of history in favour of a more convenient myth.

In 1914 the writer, Julián Juderías, used the term ‘black legend’ to describe a tradition of anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic historical writing that often focused on the gross exaggeration of the crimes of the Inquisition and the *Conquistadors*, and demonised Spaniards as inherently evil. The term seems an entirely suitable one to appropriate for the New Atheism’s attempt to breathe new life into old myths of religious malevolence. In what follows, three of these anti-religionist black legends are considered in detail.

## NOTES

1. *TEoF*, 13.
2. *TNA*, 107.
3. See, *GiNG*, 64; *TEoF*, 223.
4. *GiNG*, 282.
5. *TNA*, 69.
6. *IDoA*, 89; *TGD*, 306.
7. *GiNG*, 280; *TEoF*, 128–129.
8. *GiNG*, 283.
9. *TEoF*, 85.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Superstition and the Stake: Witch-Hunting and the Terrible Consequences of Believing in the Supernatural

For the New Atheists, mere supernaturalism is dangerous. It apparently exerts a uniquely dissolving influence upon human reason. If we are in any doubt, let us remember what happened when the notion that magical forces pervaded with world went largely unchallenged. In *The End of Faith* Sam Harris asks us to put ourselves in the place of someone accused of witchcraft in early modern Europe:

Without warning you are seized and brought before a judge. Did you create a thunderstorm and destroy the village harvest? Did you kill your neighbour with the evil eye?...You will soon learn that questions of this sort admit of no exculpatory reply.

So to be accused of witchcraft is to be guilty, the first movement of a judicial machine designed only to harvest victims. You must confess, and only a confession that implicates others will be accepted:

Perhaps you and three acquaintances of your choosing *did* change into hares and consort with the devil himself. The sight of the iron boots designed to crush your feet seems to refresh your memory. Yes, Friedrich, Arthur, and Otto are sorcerers too. Their wives? Witches all.

Any attempt to resist the judicial fantasy is simply to invite ‘the furthest reaches of human suffering’ (thumb-screws, the *strappado*, squassation, slow roasting) until the requisite narrative of diabolism is extracted. Now

the machine has one final snare for those with any fight left in them. Once freed from the torturer might not you retract your confession? This will be taken to reveal only the true depths of your iniquity and see you returned to the torture chamber. Not all those caught by the machine will die, but all will be punished unjustly because, in the end, the crimes for which they have been brutalised are simply impossible.<sup>1</sup>

For many anti-religionists, the early modern European witch-hunt epitomises the shameful tragedy of supernaturalism. Vast numbers died for, quite literally, nothing. They died simply because other humans believed that magical forces could be used to do them harm—to inflict ‘*maleficium*.’ They saw witchcraft in the destruction of crops by blight or storm, in the deaths of livestock, in the illness of humans and in the visiting upon some of demonic possession. Witches were believed to be the servants of the Devil, who met with him at ‘sabbats’ to engage in murder and orgiastic depravity. Requiring ‘an extraordinary degree of credulity’ and ‘fantastical displays of cruelty’, witch-hunting is testament to the horror of a judicial machinery ‘oiled by faith.’ (Harris)<sup>2</sup> It offers a powerful warning from history as to the corrosive effect of supernaturalism upon the human mind—its sheer ‘deranging’ force (Harris), and the lethal certitude it brings. Those with ‘faith’, A. C. Grayling tells us of the witch-hunters, those who can truly believe without evidence, ‘feel entitled to do anything.’<sup>3</sup>

The witch-hunt was once a powerful presence in the secularist litany of the crimes of supernaturalism. But over fifty years of scholarly investigation has eroded much of its force, and if there are lessons to be learned, they are not the ones that anti-religionists want to teach us.

### THE ILLUSION OF POLEMICAL EFFICIENCY

Readers of the current anti-religionist literature will not find it littered with references to witchcraft. It does not have to be. The use of a handful of well-known short-hands is sufficient to conjure a whole history of persecution that we are expected to understand implicitly. ‘Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion’, Dawkins instructs us. We can imagine simply ‘no witch-hunts.’ No elaboration is necessary for the point is obvious.<sup>4</sup> Grand claims as to the nature of witch-hunting trip off the anti-religionist keyboard with apparent ease:

To be accused of demonic possession or contact with the Evil One was to be convicted. (Christopher Hitchens)

In the 1400s the Inquisition changed its focus [from heresy] to witchcraft and thousands of women were tortured into confessing and then burned or hanged. (Victor Stenger)

Witch hysteria raged for three centuries with estimates of the number executed ranging from a hundred thousand to two million. (Victor Stenger)<sup>5</sup>

The polemical readiness of this supposed history demonstrates its place in current secularist discourse. These writers are not levelling an accusation so much as calling on their readers to remember a conviction. As a crime safely proven, the witch-hunt can take its place among the arsenal of examples of religious evil that can be deployed whenever the argument demands a pithily economical condemnation of faith.

So ingrained is the sense of the obviousness of supernaturalism's crime that anti-religionists seem unconcerned to check whether their understanding is accurate. Contra Hitchens, no-one was accused of being diabolically possessed for the simple reason that possession was not a crime but a diagnosis. And only in the 'superhunts' that for a few decades afflicted a handful of areas of the Holy Roman Empire, may something like the equation of suspicion with conviction have existed. Contra Stenger, the Inquisitions killed very few witches and no serious historian now believes the number of executions for witchcraft exceeded 50,000. Yet in each case the lay reader would be forgiven for assuming that a strong body of evidence supports claims that are made with such confidence, and that those pithy condemnations can be waved through, leaving more time for the close inspection of less certain matters.

This sense of efficiency can lead to polemics that are simply odd. Take Grayling's discussion of 'faith' in *The Meaning of Things* (2001). Faith, he argues, is always potentially murderous because without the anchor of evidentialism it naturally encourages the kind of 'utter certainty' that takes violent offence at any challenge. Science, by contrast, must be 'perverted' ('by politics and politicians') before it becomes destructive.<sup>6</sup> The argument itself is a familiar part of the anti-religionist arsenal, but Grayling's choice of illustration is curious, for he offers us the case of the French priest, Urbain Grandier, tortured and burned alive as a witch in 1634.

Grandier, Grayling tells us, was an intelligent and charismatic priest, given both to amorous adventures and political activism. In 1618, he made an enemy through ridicule of the future Cardinal Richelieu. The groundwork for Richelieu's revenge was laid in 1630 when the nuns of the Ursuline convent at Loudun began to exhibit hysterical behaviour and to accuse Grandier of inflicting demonic possession on them. A first inquiry into the outbreak was short-lived; 'local scepticism and the more influential disbelief of the Bishop of Poitiers and the Archbishop of Bordeaux put an end to it.' But when Grandier again publicly defied Richelieu, the opportunity to finally silence the priest was too good to miss. The Cardinal ordered the reopening of the case and there ensued a public circus of attempted exorcisms and the taking of evidence from the possessing demons who (through the voices of the nuns) declared that they had been summoned by Grandier. When a written pact was produced, signed by the priest and an array of demons, his fate was sealed. He was savagely tortured by his fellow clerics and dragged straight to the stake even as some of the nuns, finally confronted with the consequences of what they had done, tried to withdraw their accusations.<sup>7</sup>

The problems with the narrative are obvious. Rather than an exposé of faith, Grayling has given us a story of political intrigue. That the nuns of Loudun became convinced they were possessed, or even that they simply expected to be believed, speaks no doubt to the force of supernaturalism in 1630s France. But their claims were not met with universal and bloodthirsty credulity. By Grayling's own account the first accusations stalled because of both general and high-powered scepticism, and it took Richelieu's influence to give the case new momentum. He does not suggest that the Cardinal was motivated by any witch-hunting fervour himself, rather by simple malice and opportunism. This would place Grandier's trial for witchcraft in the same vein as those which used accusations of financial corruption or treason to bring down political enemies.

There are many aspects to the Grandier case that illustrate the potential violence of both supernaturalism and institutional religion, but Grayling can isolate none in the trial free from political influence. He himself concludes, without any apparent awareness that he has contradicted his own argument, that '[t]o read about the terrible fate of Urbain Grandier is to follow...a black story of intrigue, politics, malice, duplicity, credulity, suffering and madness.' Absolutely. Where is the real distinction between this and the external machinations always to be

blamed for the harm wrought by science? Why does he believe the case substantiates his argument? It is difficult not to suspect that for Grayling any witchcraft narrative will do because he has predetermined, quite wrongly, that they all speak to his conclusions as to the inherent violence of belief.

## RATIONALIST HISTORY AND RATIONALIST MYTHOLOGY

Where does this misplaced confidence in the polemical efficiency of the witch-hunt come from? It is a bequest from the nineteenth-century history of progress. The images conjured up are those that entered the popular consciousness after they had been shaped first by the recorders of the Enlightenment's triumph over superstition, and later by neo-pagan and feminist writers concerned to claim for their ancestors victimhood in the crime of the witch-hunt. In most cases the influence is indirect (but no less real for that). Not so in *The End of Faith*, where Sam Harris finds his most telling narratives of the credulity of witch beliefs in the book by the Scottish poet, Charles Mackay, *Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, published in 1841. He also uses Bertrand Russell's 1935 work, *Religion and Science*, and here a broader influence is implicit, since Russell himself drew upon a number of major rationalist histories such as William Lecky's *The Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism* (1878) and Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare between Science and Theology* (1897).<sup>8</sup> To polemicists looking to flesh out their attacks on faith with examples of bloodthirsty unreason, nineteenth-century rationalist history, which abounds with them, will have obvious attractions. To historians of witchcraft, however, such books are now historical sources themselves, the nature and scope of their influence the subject of academic study.

The historian of modern pagan witchcraft, Ronald Hutton, has observed that the Enlightenment rejection of the notion of *malefic* supernatural power made new demands on scholarship, which had now to explain why so many had been killed for a crime that had never existed.<sup>9</sup> The *philosophes* immediately found in the issue the confirmation of their suspicions as to the pernicious nature of credulity and superstition, and their writings shaped the discourse of witchcraft thereafter. Systematic investigation into the witch-hunt developed through the nineteenth century,<sup>10</sup> and if its publications varied in focus and tone, the



same question predominated, and variations on the same answer were always offered.

It was axiomatic that the belief in magic represented the height of premodern superstition, the hunting of witches the very depths to which human behaviour could be plunged by supernaturalism. 'Belief in the infernal art of witchcraft', Howard Williams declared in his *The Superstition of Witchcraft* in 1865, 'is perhaps the most horrid, certainly the most absurd, phenomenon in the religious history of the world.' Others wrote of the 'fearful calamity' of witch beliefs, of 'legalised murders' and of 'thousands...sacrificed...with bigotry for their advocate, ignorance for the judge and fanaticism for their executioner.'<sup>11</sup> Superstition appeared an almost tangible and active force. For the poet and scholar, James Russell Lowell, it could be observed 'peopling the midnight of the mind with fearful shapes and phrenetic suggestions, a monstrous brood of its own begetting.' Andrew Dickson White imagined it as a sceptic-engulfing 'tide', for Williams it was a 'plague-spot that knew no distinction of class or rank', whilst for others it was a 'thick mist of ignorance' enveloping and blinding people.<sup>12</sup> Yet, whilst such externalising metaphors appealed to rationalist authors, theirs were intended to be histories of the human folly that empowered superstition and that for too long had humiliated the species.<sup>13</sup> Thus the history professor, Henry Ferguson, wrote in 1894 that 'primeval' man's ignorant terror of 'the unseen' remained 'lurking in the human mind' to be activated in 'a grovelling fear of evil spirits.' John Mitchell and John Dickie, authors of *The Philosophy of Witchcraft* (1839), concluded that 'wonder and regret' was the apt response to such credulity and that future generations would 'thank their good fortune that they live in a time when such fooleries and cruelties have no place among men.'<sup>14</sup> Some were less belligerent in acknowledging the vulnerability of the human mind. Thus John Taylor, writing in 1908 on the New England witch trials, blamed 'that strange element in human nature which dreads whatever is weird and uncanny', but cautioned: '[w]ho may count himself altogether free from the subtle power of the old mystery and its fantastical imageries when the spirit of unrest is abroad?'<sup>15</sup>

The witchcraze itself all took to be a crime of a Church which had wantonly exploited humanity's natural credulity. Pagan religion, it was often argued, had been absorbed by Christianity as the dark side of an all-encompassing dichotomy between the divine and the diabolic, the

power of credulity now being refocused overwhelmingly on Satan.<sup>16</sup> 'It may be stated', William Lecky claimed,

as an invariable truth, that, whenever a religion which rests in a great measure on a system of terrorism, and which paints in dark and forcible colours the misery of men and the power of evil spirits, is intensely realised, it will engender the belief in witchcraft or magic. The panic which its teachings will create, will overbalance the faculties of multitudes.<sup>17</sup>

The Church then took the lead in persecuting the offences it had dreamed up.<sup>18</sup> Some writers located the offence in the imperial Roman Church, others in the rise to power of the Inquisitions, but all credited the faith with creating the peculiar cultural infrastructure needed to sustain the craze. Protestantism, and particularly Puritanism, did not escape censure.<sup>19</sup> They were castigated both for failing to jettison witch beliefs with other Catholic superstitions and for seeking to prove their credentials by rivalling their opponent in anti-diabolism. 'It suited with the stern, uncompromising, Puritan temper', Lynn Linton remarked of the Scots in his *Witch Stories* (1861), 'to tear this accursed thing from the heart of the nation and offer it, bleeding and palpitating, as a sacrifice to the Lord.'<sup>20</sup> Whatever the variations of time, place or denomination, Christianity's murderous paranoia was taken to be beyond dispute.

Yet, as Ronald Hutton has also pointed out, if nineteenth-century rationalists historicised the witch-hunt as a dark curiosity from another time, their writings were far from triumphalist. The vehemence of their anti-superstition was fuelled by the concern that the war was far from over and that many remained to be emancipated. 'The enlightening influence of science', Williams wrote 'is unfortunately limited in the extent of its influence, as well as uncertain in duration; while reason enjoys a feeble reign compared to ignorance and imagination.' Accordingly, the histories of witchcraft were warnings. 'If it is the great office of history to teach by experience', Williams continued, 'it is never useless to examine the causes and facts of a mischievous creed that has its roots deep in the ignorant fears of mankind; but against the recurrence of the fatal effects of fanaticism apparent in the earliest and latest records of the world, there can be no sufficient security.' Linton agreed: 'it is a dreary page in human history; but so long as a spark of superstition lingers in the world it will have its special and direct uses.'<sup>21</sup>

Few, if any, of the current New Atheists and anti-religionists appear be aware of their heritage, but it is theirs nonetheless. It is a history that has lost much of its definition, becoming ever more nebulous as its imagery and conclusions have been detached from the books in which they were offered, to be assimilated free-floating into the popular consciousness. As such they have been protected from the fate of their authors, whose misunderstandings were exposed by the careful archival work of their successors and whose books continue to be cited (more or less respectfully) largely as the faltering early steps in an academic study of the history of witch-hunting that has since become much more sophisticated. Unparalleled credulity, superstition and hysteria; the Church's blood-lust and the crimes of the Inquisitions; the grand (sometimes genocidal) scale of the 'craze'; the liberating power of science over such dangerous beliefs—these terms of rationalist history became items of common knowledge and were mythologised. Today they continue to gift anti-religionism the apparent efficiency of received wisdom. But they are not the history of the witch-hunt. Let us consider two important misconceptions in more depth.

### NUMBERS (AND THEIR MEANING)

In the last years of the eighteenth century, an antiquarian from the German town of Quedlinburg, Gottfried Christian Voigt, got his sums catastrophically wrong. Extrapolating from records of the execution of thirty witches in that town between 1569 and 1683, he deduced that, if all communities executed the same proportion of their populations for witchcraft at a constant rate throughout the entire history of Christendom, then the total number of witches killed amounted to some 9,442,994. His figures, promoted by anti-Catholic propagandists as part of the German *Kulturrekampf* in the 1870s, became the most striking expression of a particularly tenacious myth of the witch-hunt.<sup>22</sup> That the Church assaulted its people on a scale we would now call 'genocidal' became the orthodoxy of popular conception, mainstream history and special interest groups alike. Neo-pagan movements regularly measured in millions the victimisation of their supposed forebears, and, with the emergence of campaigning feminist histories in the 1970s, the nine million figure was accorded a new role as the statistics of 'gendercide.'<sup>23</sup> Yet all of Voigt's assumptions were wrong. According to our best

calculations, based in exhaustive archival research, he was out by around 9,400,000. The genocidal witch-hunt never occurred.

The groundwork for the rationalist adoption of the myth was again laid in the Enlightenment. It is notable how conservative many of the early estimates appear in comparison to what would follow. Voltaire estimated 100,000 executions, whilst the Catholic scholar, Jakob Anton Kollman (1728–1787), happened upon the nearly accurate figure of 30,000. But, as Hutton points out, these were still early expressions of a paradigm of victimology: shocking revelations as to the scale of the miscarriage of justice perpetrated by the unenlightened Church and state.<sup>24</sup> As such, they prepared the way for hyperbole. Sam Harris' favoured source, Charles Mackay, is epitomic:

An epidemic terror seized upon the nations...The word ['witch'] was upon everybody's tongue—France, Italy, Germany, England, Scotland, and the far North, successively ran mad upon this subject, and for a long series of years, furnished their tribunals with so many trials for witchcraft that other crimes were seldom or never spoken of. Thousands upon thousands of unhappy persons fell victims to this cruel and absurd delusion. In many cities of Germany...the average number of executions for this pretended crime, was six hundred annually, or two every day, if we leave out the Sundays, when, it is to be supposed, that even this madness refrained from its work.<sup>25</sup>

'[F]ew errors have ever cost so much shedding of human blood', Andrew Dixon White declared. 'Again and again' bemoaned Herbert Casson, in his *The Crime of Credulity* (1901), 'this maddest of all madnesses swept over Europe like a prairie fire.'<sup>26</sup> The easy certainty with which the highest figures could be deployed is seen in Bertrand Russell's much-quoted comments in *Why I am not a Christian*:

You find this curious fact, that the more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and worse the state of affairs. In the so called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there was the Inquisition, with its tortures; there were the millions of unfortunate women burnt as witches...<sup>27</sup>

The tendency has continued among secularist polemics even as the realities of the scale of witch-hunting have been exposed by historians.<sup>28</sup>

In 1996, Carl Sagan could still write of the ‘execution of countless “witches” all over Europe’ in his bestselling attack on irrationalism, *The Demon Haunted World*.<sup>29</sup> In 1990, the journalist, James Haught, claimed that execution figures may have been as high as two million, and it is a paraphrasing of his widely cited *Penthouse* article that provided our quotes from Victor Stenger at the start of this chapter. Haught’s figures continue to circulate uncorrected around secularist Websites and blogs, and with Stenger’s unquestioning absorption of them into *The New Atheism*, anti-religionist polemic takes yet another step away from the real history of the witch-hunt.<sup>30</sup>

Readers of Christopher Hitchen’s collection, *The Portable Atheist*, will encounter some of the above (Sagan’s discussion of witchcraft is reprinted, whilst Russell’s argument is quoted by Ibn Warraq), as well as a Mackayesque indulgence in hyperbole from Mark Twain.<sup>31</sup> They will also, however, find more accurate execution figures—‘perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 over three hundred years’—given in the section reprinted from Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith*.<sup>32</sup> Harris takes his figures from Robin Briggs’ *Witches and Neighbours* (1996), but he appears not altogether comfortable with what they might be taken to imply. In an endnote he quotes Briggs’ description of feminist and neo-pagan estimates as belonging to the ‘wilder shores’ of witchcraft history, but is at pains to point out that,

[s]uch a revaluation of numbers does little to mitigate the horror and injustice of this period. Even to read of the Salem witch trials, which resulted in the hanging of ‘only’ nineteen people, is to be brought face to face with the seemingly boundless evil that is apt to fill the voids in our understanding of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, Harris is concerned that the revised execution figures may lead some to question the special place of witch-hunting amongst supernaturalism’s crimes. He is certainly correct to remind his readers that each witch executed was an individual who underwent a terrifying ordeal at the hands of men who did not have to believe in her guilt. As such we will be obliged to find their plight significant whatever the levels of the overall persecution turn out to be. But no current historian of witchcraft, least of all Robin Briggs, has argued otherwise.

Rather, if such a problem exists it is one of secularism’s own making. Having been content to employ the image of genocidal violence and of a

wildfire craze burning throughout Europe, the ‘crime’ of witch-hunting cannot but appear diminished when its true scale is understood. Harris’ argument conveniently sidesteps the fact that we now know the witch-hunt was not as it was once thought to have been, and that this has consequences for our assessment of the effects of supernaturalism. When we could imagine millions of victims and a whole judicial machinery turned over to an obsessively lethal credulity, it was much easier to invoke the secularist’s blackest nightmare—the marriage of superstition and Inquisition—and give it the apparent substance of history. Yet again, the iniquity of supernaturalism could be self-evident. Look at how much effort had been given to pursuing a fantasy, how zealously the Church had dehumanised and tormented its own people, how oppressive had been the fear generated. Look simply at how many (‘countless’, ‘legions’, ‘hordes’) supernaturalism had killed. But secularists must now accept that the situation was radically, if inconveniently, different.

The average inhabitant of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries probably never saw a witch trial. The chances of the average woman finding herself formerly charged with witchcraft—and so facing execution—were minute. The fact is that there were simply too few witch trials to generate the oppressive weight on the popular consciousness that feminist, neo-pagan and secularist polemicists have liked to imagine. The population of Europe in 1600 is reckoned to have been around 100 million. Perhaps 100,000 trials for witchcraft took place across Europe in the early modern period, the majority occurring between 1560 and 1660. In many areas, it is highly probable that individual communities had no history at all of formal witch-hunting, whilst for others such histories as they had were shaped by the notoriety of events that passed into local legend precisely because they were so unusual. Even in those areas where it was most pronounced, witch-hunting was highly sporadic, never routine.

To speak of averages, of course, masks more complex realities, for the risk of being caught up in witch-hunting was not evenly distributed. Accidents of gender, social status and geography combined to dramatically increase the danger for some, but this does not help the anti-religionist argument. The overwhelming majority of executions took place within the Holy Roman Empire (modern Germany, Switzerland, northeastern France and the southern Netherlands). Of the 30,000–35,000 executions believed to have taken place between 1560 and 1660, 25,000–30,000 were inflicted under the imperial law code, the *Carolina*,

and only two major witch-hunting centres—Scotland and Denmark—lay outside its jurisdiction. The historian of French witchcraft, William Monter, points to a useful comparison for understanding the unevenness of the scale of witch-hunting across Europe. Both the kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire are estimated to have had populations of around twenty million in 1600, yet against the latter's 30,000 executions, the former had killed less than 500 witches by 1650.<sup>34</sup> But, as Monter also points out, witch-hunting was hardly endemic throughout an empire that was actually a federation of over 300 autonomous governments. Its dubious distinction of having executed three out of every four witches between 1560 and 1660 can be credited to only a handful of its states where witch-hunting reached extensive, sometimes massive proportions: the so-called 'superhunts' that occurred between 1586 and 1639.<sup>35</sup> In order to find anything resembling the secularist nightmare, then, our focus must be pulled ever tighter until we have moved from the entire history of Christendom to three centuries between the end of medieval Europe and the beginning of the Enlightenment, to a hundred years within the Holy Roman Empire and finally to fifty-five years in the archbishoprics of Trier, Mainz and Cologne, the town of Ellwangen and the bishoprics of Bamberg and Würzburg.

This cannot be dismissed as a virtual irrelevance in the shadow of the 'boundless evil' that might be observed in any single witch's plight. The more concentrated we find large scale witch-hunting to have been, the more questions we need to ask as to the cultural and political specifics that provoked it in some areas but not in others. Simply attributing it to 'supernaturalism' or 'credulity' will clearly be insufficient.

These are questions, however, that anti-religionists can avoid by effectively turning the study of witch-hunting on its head.

## NO WITCH-HUNT WITHOUT WITCHES

Though it is difficult to generalise about the many factors that conspired to make villagers rise up against their neighbours, it is obvious that belief in the existence of witches was the *sine qua non* of the phenomenon.<sup>36</sup>

Sam Harris offers a tautology instead of an analysis. Consistent with his approach throughout *The End of Faith*, he insists that the witch-hunt was first and foremost a crime of belief. Early modern Europeans believed 'utterly' in the reality of *maleficium*. Whatever the social contexts in

which accusations may have emerged, he tells us, whatever the political contexts that encouraged authorities to take them seriously, people could only engage in witch-hunting if they believed that there were witches to hunt. No witch beliefs, no witch-hunt.

Logically the argument is unassailable, but its analytical usefulness is almost nil. All historians of the subject understand implicitly that without the belief in the power of witches there could have been no trials for witchcraft. But they also understand that such beliefs have tended *not* to lead to the formalised prosecution that characterised part of the European response to witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their aim has been to explain how apparently timeless human concerns were diabolised and given an urgency that made some of the judicial authorities of the period uniquely responsive to the ancient crime of *maleficium*. In offering instead his *sine qua non* as sufficient explanation for the witch-hunt, Harris claims the analytical starting point as the conclusion.

Throughout its history, mankind has exhibited a keen sense of the power of the supernatural. Whether we see this as the expression of an innate sense of the transcendent, or as the result of cultural conditioning, or as an evolutionary by-product, the evidence for its ubiquity is undeniable. Humans have, moreover, tended to be unwilling to remain passive in the face of their supernatural reality. Culture after culture has developed rituals to placate or harness the unseen powers, and all have identified gifted individuals able to use magic for good or ill. These beliefs—witch beliefs—have been powerful mechanisms for explaining misfortune and dispelling its apparent randomness, and it is in their nature to encourage strong conviction. At least part of their force would be lost if they led only to the conclusion that the existence of magic allows that there *might* be witches. Moreover, witch beliefs offered the possibility of counter-agency through personal protectives (amulets, charms and spells), ‘white’ witches and prayer. Physical attacks upon witches and lynchings have often been considered justified, whilst, more formally, *maleficium* has been punishable in numerous legal codes. In encouraging such responses, witch beliefs have always victimised. The diagnosis of *maleficium* demanded the identification of an offender, but (regardless of her intent) the ‘perpetrator’ could not have caused harm by the method for which they were punished. Cultural forms of victimisation may have been far more common than physical and legal ones. In many cultures, the power of witchcraft has been believed to be passed



through families, with the consequence that generations could suffer forms of social ostracism and live in constant danger of becoming a focus for suspicion.

No doubt, then, witch beliefs, have been a potent, and very often destructive force. Versions of the supernaturalism outlined above will be found in ancient Mesopotamia and Anatolia, in Greece and Rome, in medieval Europe, in the Islamic Middle East, in Mesoamerica, in India, in China, in Japan...the list could go on and on. Yet extensive and institutionalised witch persecution is a feature only of the history of some parts of early modern Europe and America.

I have argued that perhaps a majority of communities in early modern Europe saw little or no formal witch-hunting. They were, however, as prone to witch beliefs as any premodern society. The early modern village was an environment pervaded by magic and by the fears it encouraged. All of the normal activities of men and women were characterised by an uncertainty and precariousness that lent force to the notion of external influence for good or ill. Production and reproduction were particularly acute concerns that provoked extensive investment in magical protection and fear of the disruptive power of witchcraft. The failure of crops and the death of livestock; personal illness or the sickness of loved ones; sexual impotence, infertility or the deaths of infants—these were the common and traumatic focuses for suspicions of *maleficium*. But its reach was also understood to encompass the more mundane (yet vital) areas of household management and productivity. Thus, witches also acted as ‘anti-housewives’, maliciously disrupting activities such as the churning of butter or the spinning of thread. Some forms of witchcraft might be obviously extraordinary, such as harming a wax image of the intended victim. But more commonly they were characterised by a banality that lent a sinister uncertainty to ordinary social interactions. Perhaps the most common means of effecting *maleficium* was through words. The angry speech of an argument over the refusal of alms might be considered the mode by which a curse had been delivered, but spells might also be cast in the apparently kind words of enquiring after somebody’s health. In such an environment suspicions were easily provoked and long harboured, and they circulated readily in a culture that, in its collectivism, placed a premium on public reputation. The sense of the power of *maleficium*, the knowledge of specific instances of harm and the close proximity of those known to be suspect were, then, part of the norm of the early modern community; and yet the fact remains that even in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the majority of those suspected of witchcraft never saw a court, let alone a torture chamber.

By virtue of this simple fact, we must understand that the legal persecution of witches was an aberration in the history of supernaturalism. Witch beliefs clearly have the potential to fuel a formal persecution of innocents on a large, even massive, scale. Yet for the vast majority of their history they have not done so. Were we to content ourselves with Harris' *sine qua non* as the explanation of witch-hunting, we would be forced to view the phenomenon in opposing terms to those he wishes to show us. We would not ask why there was so much witch-hunting in early modern Europe, but rather why there was so little of it throughout human history.

### THE WITCH PYRES OF 'THE INQUISITION'

If supernaturalism itself is insufficient to explain the witch-hunt, what of the role of the Church? It is simply remarkable given the certainty and accessibility of scholarly assertions to the contrary, that 'the Inquisition' continues to loom large in anti-religionist polemic as the foremost persecutor of witches.<sup>37</sup> The attractiveness for New Atheists and anti-religionists of the proposition that the Inquisitions take the blame for witch-hunting is obvious. That the institutional embodiment of Christian totalitarianism should be responsible for superstition's greatest crime is a polemical godsend but is also, no doubt, emotionally satisfying. It offers a history with the completeness of fulfilled expectations and tangible culpability. An irritable historian will want to know why none of these polemicists thought to ask whether the popular stereotype of Inquisitorial guilt is justified? The answer is surely that, within the pre-conceptions of anti-religionism, it just makes sense.

If so, accepting the real history of the role of the Inquisitions in the witch-hunt will be counter-intuitive for many secularists. The myth of the single Inquisition which terrorised Europe will have to be abandoned. Three separate Inquisitions—the Spanish, Portuguese and Roman—claimed jurisdiction over witches in the period of the hunt. There was no transnational jurisdiction although a consistent 'Inquisitorial' approach to witchcraft had certainly emerged by the middle of the sixteenth century. No orgy of witch burning occurred. Rather, the Inquisitions maintained an unusually cautious, even sceptical, attitude to the evidence for witchcraft, and they regularly acted as one of the

most effective forces for the limitation of witch-hunting in the areas in which they had influence.

We have seen that by far the largest numbers of executions for witchcraft occurred in certain areas of the Holy Roman Empire. Almost all other jurisdictions will appear to have low lethality by comparison, but the Inquisitions recorded some the lowest levels of all. In its entire history, the Portuguese Inquisition killed a single witch, at Evora in 1626. Exact figures for the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions are not available, but such indications as we have suggest execution rates that were also very low. The Spanish Inquisition seems to have executed around two dozen witches over a period of a hundred years before 1610 and none thereafter.

To understand how far removed from the anti-religionist nightmare Inquisitorial witch-hunting was, we can consider the history of the institution in Spain. Between the 1490s and 1520s, witch prosecutions were sporadic; the preserve mainly of the particularly aggressive Saragossa tribunal in Aragon. In 1525, an outbreak of witch-hunting by secular authorities in the Kingdom of Navarre led to a jurisdictional conflict which provoked the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Madrid to prepare definitive guidelines on witch prosecution. These, ready by the end of 1526, demanded high levels of evidence for conviction and established a principle of centralisation that, specifically in witchcraft cases, removed much of the inquisitors' freedom of manoeuvre. Whilst the *Suprema* was adamant that witchcraft should be punished, it also incorporated into its guidelines serious local measures to reform the behaviour of witches and to address the often mistaken beliefs of accusers. Madrid could impose the 1526 guidelines with relative ease on a number of local tribunals, but where a tribunal was determined to ignore them—as occurred in Barcelona in 1549—witches could still be executed on the basis of torture and inadequate evidence.

In the second half of the sixteenth century the Spanish Inquisition paid so little attention to witchcraft that William Monter has described it as a 'forgotten offence'.<sup>38</sup> Yet after sixty years of relative inactivity, the Inquisition rediscovered, briefly, an interest in burning witches.

This was the famous Basque witch-hunt that promised to engulf hundreds of victims in 1609–1611. The Inquisitions' own disinterest in witch-hunting may have itself contributed to this strange turnaround. When the great French witch-hunt in the border territory of Pays de Labourd spilled over into Basque Spain, the *Suprema* sought to

reacquaint itself with the Inquisition's guiding precedents. Reviewing old cases, it found two starkly contrasting approaches. Copies of the 1526 regulations counselled caution and scepticism, but a 1548 consultation with theologians and jurists, carried out by the wayward Barcelona tribunal, stated that scepticism was itself a persuasion of the Devil. For once, the *Suprema* sided with the witch-hunters.<sup>39</sup> In November 1610, at an *auto* held at Logroño, six witches were burned at the stake in front of thousands of onlookers—a spectacle that was followed by a massive increase in witchcraft accusations throughout the Basque country. The scale of the ensuing witch-hunt was enormous, but there developed a conflict between the Logroño tribunal and a number of sceptical churchmen in which the former soon lost ground. In March 1611, the most junior member of the tribunal, Alonso de Salazar Frías (1564–1635), was ordered to conduct a visitation of the Basque country. He was to encourage confessions through an Edict of Grace, promising leniency to those who came forward voluntarily, but was not to use force to extract them. After an investigation of almost unparalleled thoroughness, Salazar offered two conclusions: that the original handling of the case by the Inquisition had been inept, and that, whilst he did not deny the possibility of witchcraft, not a single instance of it had taken place in the Basque country.<sup>40</sup>

The *Suprema* accepted Salazar's findings. In August 1614 it issued new and restraining procedural instructions, and suspended all existing cases unless fresh and convincing evidence came to light. Those who wished to revoke their confessions were to be given a sympathetic hearing, and an amnesty was extended to anyone who came forward to admit using coercion upon suspects.<sup>41</sup> Accepting Salazar's now celebrated conclusion that 'there were neither witches nor bewitched until they were talked and written about', the *Suprema* issued an 'Edict of Silence' forbidding the public discussion of witchcraft. By 1617, the Basque witch panic had died out, and the 1614 instructions became the de facto witch policy of the Spanish Inquisition thereafter. But, without taking any credit from Salazar (whose efforts almost certainly saved many hundreds of lives), what had actually happened was that the institution had reverted to its pre-1610 leniency. Salazar had protected and extended the policies developed in 1526, and so, although it did not have to be, the Basque hunt became an exception to the Spanish Inquisition's general moderation towards witchcraft.

What did Inquisitorial caution mean in practise? Procedural rules sought to institutionalise restraint. The Roman Inquisition, for example, demanded scepticism with regard to a *corpus delicti* until other possibilities had been exhausted and physicians had confirmed that an illness or death could not have had a natural cause. The Spanish Inquisition's 1614 instructions required also that clergy explain to their parishioners that the destruction of crops could often be natural. With confessions inquisitors were to verify exactly that the individual crimes claimed by witches tallied with instances of harm at the time and place indicated, and, even if they did, were to ascertain if any natural cause might still be blamed.<sup>42</sup> The possibility of malicious accusation was well recognised. In 1614, it was stipulated that investigations must consider whether any enmity existed between accuser and accused, whilst those suspects who came before the Roman Inquisition were required as standard to provide a list of those they considered to be their enemies.<sup>43</sup> Under the Roman jurisdiction, evidence was to be gathered both against and for the defendant. In the searching of her house, the discovery of suspicious powders and ointments might weigh against the accused, but finding devotional items would weigh in her favour. Suspicious artefacts, however, were only to be counted as evidence of witchcraft if it was determined that they could have no other possible use.<sup>44</sup>

Most importantly, given its potential to escalate witch-hunting, the Mediterranean Inquisitions displayed a marked scepticism with regard to evidence of attendance at the witches' sabbath. Much consideration was given to a classic demonological puzzle: do witches attend the sabbat physically or only in their imaginations? If the latter, then to what extent could the crimes committed there be considered real? Certainly accounts of what had been *seen* at the gathering would have to be treated with extreme caution, especially denunciations of other supposed attendees.<sup>45</sup> Thus procedure demanded that sabbat confessions should not be accepted without verification that such a meeting had actually occurred and that the defendant had been absent from home at the correct time. No person was to be arrested on the basis only of identification by another witch, nor was anyone already in custody to be condemned solely on the basis of such an identification.<sup>46</sup> The Spanish 1614 instructions made a careful distinction as to apostasy. Those who had confessed to Devil-worship outside the sabbat—when 'awake'—would need to be reconciled as witting heretics. Those, however, who confessed only to committing apostasy at the sabbat, and not whilst 'awake', were likely to

have experienced the crime only as a diabolic illusion and need only be absolved as a precaution.<sup>47</sup> The Roman Inquisition was similarly cautious. Its judges were instructed simply to discount identifications of sabbat attendees by confessing witches.<sup>48</sup> In short, inquisitors were to be constantly aware that, in giving credence prematurely to sabbat confessions, they might themselves fall prey to diabolic manipulation and persecute innocents.

Accusations of *maleficium*, Sam Harris assures us, admitted ‘of no exculpatory reply’, a grim reality guaranteed by the use of unlimited torture.<sup>49</sup> Yet the legal historian, John Tedeschi, has shown that, contrary to such popular myths, the Roman Inquisition allowed the accused witch to mount a defence and provided her with the means to doing so. Only when the defence had made its case could judicial torture be applied, and then only if the defendant maintained her innocence in the face of compelling evidence or was believed not to have made a full confession. The torment used was the *strappado*, strictly controlled at around thirty minutes to an hour, with the use of jerking and weights being prohibited. Regulated torture remained a terrible experience, of course, but confession was by no means a certainty; in ‘an astonishing number of cases’, Tedeschi notes, defendants withstood the ordeal. Indeed, the historian of the Venetian tribunal, Ruth Martin, found no instance of a witchcraft suspect changing their plea under torture.<sup>50</sup>

So uncertain was the evidence in witchcraft cases that Inquisitorial procedure formalised a special degree of consultation and oversight. Thus, the 1526 Spanish guidelines stipulated that no single inquisitor should decide a witchcraft case, and that the advice of an ecclesiastical judge, lawyers and theologians must be sought. Exceptional safeguards were also introduced with regards to capital punishment. Local tribunals were not to pass death sentences on their own initiative but only after consultation with the *Suprema*. In the case of relapsed witches, this exempted them from mandatory execution for a second offence (standard Inquisitorial practice since 1184).<sup>51</sup> Similar oversight was apparent in the Roman Inquisition. Sentences passed by local tribunals were reviewed by the Congregation of the Holy Office with special attention paid to confessions extracted by torture. Some were overturned when the details in confessions were found to be contradictory, and the Congregation also heard, and sometimes granted, appeals from convicts.<sup>52</sup>

Without, then, the complete absence of witch-hunting (which would, of course, have been infinitely preferable), it is difficult to imagine a judicial system more at odds with the image Sam Harris gives us in the opening pages of 'In the Shadow of God.'

### CHRISTIANITY AND THE WITCH-HUNTS

There is, however, a danger of taking the argument too far here and claiming a special enlightenment on the part of the Christian Church. This is the approach taken by the theologian, David Bentley Hart, writing on the other side of the God debate in his *Atheist Delusions* (2009). Hart insists the Church was only the occasional accomplice in a crime driven primarily by secular authorities and political concerns. It was 'complicit' in shaping some of the judicial mechanisms that would be so tragically abused by others, and it was 'not immune' to the alarm which spread throughout Europe. But these were exceptions to a tradition of scepticism that had long seen the Church deny outright the power of witchcraft. When it did become involved in witch-hunting, it was because some clerics listened too closely to 'popular tales' of the diabolic conspiracy, and allowed the faith to become polluted by external fantasies. Yet, even here the caution of the Inquisitions throws the brutal zealotry of their secular counterparts into sharp relief, and says much about the Church's enlightenment at a time when early scientists were still besotted with Hermetic magic, astrology and alchemy. Thus for Hart, the tragedy of the witch-hunt was not that Christianity wielded too much influence but that ultimately it wielded too little:

...it is perhaps no great marvel that the early modern fascination with diabolists and witches should have arisen in those centuries when the Christian order of Western Europe was disintegrating...Just as the Christian faith in a transcendent creator God had once stripped magic of any appearance of religious or philosophical seriousness and reduced it to mere superstition and folk craft, so the fragmentation of Christian Europe perhaps encouraged a certain kind of magical thinking to reassert itself into the anxieties of a tragic and chaotic age.<sup>53</sup>

This is, to say the least, a curious version of the witch-hunt, and one that can only be supported by Hart's extremely selective approach to Church history. Each individual element of his description possesses

historical validity but, when combined, they do not make up the whole that he intends to show. Thus, whilst the caution of the Inquisitions may exonerate them from the casually levelled charges of anti-religionists, an automatic condemnation of secular authorities must not be inferred as a consequence. Restraint and scepticism might also be found in secular courts. As the appellate court for much of northern France, for example, the *Parlement* of Paris confirmed only 24% of the witchcraft cases appealed to it, allowing executions in only 4% after 1611, and no longer killing witches after 1625. The *Parlement*'s leniency was based in an evidential caution similar to that practiced by the Inquisitions: unlike the lower courts under its jurisdiction, it refused to allow capital punishment in cases where a confession was obtained under torture.

Hart's description barely reflects the complex reality of clerical involvement in witch-hunting. He presents evidence for the Church's scepticism regarding 'pagan' witchcraft—for example, the famous ninth-century *Canon episcopi* which declared witches' powers, and their own belief in them, to be a delusion provoked by the Devil—but then ignores later developments in its approach to magic as if they had no bearing on the emergence of the witch-hunt. The impression given is that attitudes to witchcraft remained unchanged, simply becoming intensified by a 'new fascination', the origins of which apparently defy adequate explanation. Thus Hart pays some attention to the increased insecurity and anxiety that became the 'tenor' of the plague-ravaged later fourteenth century and that may have habitualised the need to find scapegoats. He accepts that the creation of the medieval Inquisitions 'helped to lay the ground for the witch-hunts', but seemingly only in providing the practical judicial framework, not in redefining the criminal. Yet the witches pursued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were no longer considered the powerless fantasists described by the *Canon episcopi*. Somewhere the image of the witch had been transformed, for she was now the witting agent of Satan, immersed in his cult and committed to performing harm in his name. Hart appears to be aware of the distinction; why does he not ask how the change came about?

Our picture of the development of the early modern propensity for witch-hunting is indeed incomplete, but we are not nearly so ignorant as Hart claims. We know, for instance, that probably the most important intellectual factors producing a determination to pursue witches was the association of magic with the Devil's pact and the emergence of the myth



of the witches' sabbat. Both were developments in which the role of the Church was central.

The myth that humans might enter into 'legal' agreements with the Devil was extremely old by the time it became a focus for scholastic theologians concerned at the increase in the practice of demonic magic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Practitioners of this elite form of sorcery sought to harness the power of the preternatural world by commanding demons to provide them with secret knowledge. Regardless of their scepticism about popular magic, Christian theologians accepted the reality of demons and their interaction with humans, and they were concerned to overcome the moral ambiguity of demonic magic. If, as its adepts claimed, the purpose was to force demons to provide the means to do good, could their magic be considered sinful? The view of the scholastics was that no demon was genuinely compelled by a sorcerer, rather they were persuaded by offerings made to them and all magic involved a reciprocal trade. This was not a conclusion that had to be forced onto the evidence—demonic magic did indeed employ animal sacrifice and libations of human blood—and it moved magic into the realm of heresy and apostasy, for the magician had given the demon the reverence and service that was due only to God. Whilst the scholastics had been concerned only with elite magic, they had also provided the means for the blanket condemnation of all forms. The Church indeed remained sceptical as to the notion that witches possessed innate magical powers, but that very position gave force to the conclusion that common *maleficium* was performed through a pact with the Devil.

Redefining magic as heresy exposed it to the accusations of collective diabolism that, by the early thirteenth century, were circulating about groups such as the Cathars and the Waldensians, as the Church responded to its fear of heresy by developing elaborate myths of secret orgiastic cabals and Devil worship. Gradually, beginning in the earlier fourteenth century, the myth was assimilated, first into the trials for elite sorcery, then, by the end of the century, into those for weather magic and animal *maleficia*. The exact development and transmission of the idea that witches attended a diabolic sabbath is indeed difficult to trace. It never became inseparable from witch beliefs—it is often pointed out, for instance, that the *Malleus Maleficarum* had very little to say on the subject—and it was never unchallenged by doubters both within and outside the Church, but by the highpoint of the witch trials few judiciaries were entirely untouched by it.

Throughout its absorption into the secular courts, the sabbat retained the hallmarks of its clerical origins. Witches supposedly took part an inversion of Christian worship. They demonstrated their rejection of the faith by saying the Nicene Creed backwards, desecrating the host, and trampling and spitting upon the cross. Satan personally re-baptised them, replacing the sign of the cross with his own mark inflicted with his claw. As demonstration of their fealty, witches then kissed the Devil's anus. The assembly was blessed with a black aspergillum, took communion with a host of consecrated offal and sang cacophonously. An ensuing orgy fulfilled all of the clergy's darkest moral nightmares. Witches danced naked. They fornicated with the Devil, with demons and with each other, both heterosexually and homosexually. Their feasts were cannibalistic, their favoured repast the flesh of murdered infants.

The practical consequence of the emergence of the concept diabolic witchcraft was to redefine the meaning of each individual crime. *Maleficium* alone was a specific act of assault notable only for the method by which it was carried out. Its diabolisation required that it now be viewed quite differently: as symptomatic of a more fundamental spiritual and intellectual treason. Once witchcraft was assumed to be cultic, new and dangerous questions could be introduced into witch trials. Now each witch identified could be regarded as only one member of a conspiracy that must be uncovered. *Maleficium* alone implied a logical endpoint to proceedings once that specific crime had been redressed. Diabolic *maleficium* implied continuation and escalation, the defendant's guilt now inseparable from questions over the sabbat and who she had seen there. Those she named could, in turn, be examined and might confess, naming new accomplices, and so on. By the late sixteenth century investigators knew what to expect, and so knew what questions to ask, and, where they were prepared to use unrestrained torture to get their answers, the results could be devastating.

This is hardly evidence of a Church only 'complicit' in the witch-hunt and 'not immune' to the panic fostered by others. Whatever the Inquisitorial caution with regard to sabbat confessions, the Church had defined the terms of a conspiracy that would be pursued viciously elsewhere. Yet this also does not prove the New Atheists and anti-religionists right. It is tempting to focus only on the content of the myths of diabolic witchcraft and the sabbat, and so to argue that, in their supernaturalism and sensationalism, they demonstrate a unique weakness of the religious mindset. The witch-hunt, we might then conclude, occurred simply

because people fantasised about supernatural power and the Devil. This at least offers the comforting notion that such a crime would be inconceivable in non-religious contexts—the very conclusion Dawkins asks us to reach as we sing along with John Lennon. Yet looking beyond the idiomatic shapes of the myth at its broader cultural meaning reveals a different picture.

Diabolic witchcraft was a version of the deviance myths that are common to all cultures, and which seem to fulfil a deep psychological need. Fantasising that there exist people who invert moral norms appears to be a ubiquitous means by which those norms are established and reinforced. The supposed assault confirms the importance of those values under threat, gives a terrible form to their antithesis and so defines what needs to be protected. The sense of threat has often been accentuated by giving such fantasies a conspiratorial edge and it appears that the notion of secret orgiastic meetings of evildoers is a similarly basic and ancient human fantasy. Many aspects of these myths will, of course, be specific to the culture generating them—hence the sabbat’s inversion of Christian ritual and morality—but others are common across cultures, particularly depictions of unbridled promiscuity and indulgence in ‘ultimate’ offences such as cannibalistic infanticide. It is a staple of histories of the witch-hunt to point out that Christians in pagan Rome, for instance, became the object themselves of such fantasies. They were believed to lure initiates into murdering children whose bodies were dismembered to be shared by the congregation. Then, extinguishing the lights in the catacombs in which they met, all would supposedly fornicate with whomever they chanced upon in the dark, heedless of gender or incest. The myth was taken seriously and contributed to the violent persecution of Christians such as that which took place in Lyon in 177.<sup>54</sup>

New Atheists and anti-religionists might object that the fear of the anti-society was always the responsibility of the religions that pervaded all premodern cultures, and in whose very nature was to oppressively defend their monopolies of moral definition. Without religion’s basic irrationalism, they might suggest, and with secularist pluralism, society would be free of such fears and their accompanying mythologies. The history of moral panics in secular societies would hardly inspire confidence in such an argument. These cannot, of course, persecute witches, but they have produced an extensive range of deviants to fear. Communism, immigration, drug-taking, rock music, raves, video ‘nasties’, gang culture, joy-riding and paedophilia are only a handful of the

areas in which mythologies of societal danger have emerged. The content of these have often been tame in comparison with medieval and early modern versions, but the satanic ritual abuse scare of the 1980s and 1990s testifies not only to the continuing lurid depths of human fantasy but also to the vulnerability to moral panic of ostensibly rational and scientifically educated people. The New Atheists may believe that they, at least, do not share this weakness, shielded as they are by the evidentialism they claim as their defining virtue. But, as we will see later, their stigmatisation of religion in general, and of Islam as an especially insidious conspiracy against reason and democracy, bear many of the hallmarks of these ingrained tendencies to anti-society scaremongering.

To understand the demonisation of witchcraft in these terms does not exonerate the Church, for it cannot be denied that Christianity provided the idiomatic content of *this* moral panic, and even if the most devastating effects of the sabbat myth were often felt in secular courts, these were staffed by a Christian laity who understood the religious significance of the diabolism they were pursuing. But it does make it impossible to see it in the simplistic terms of anti-religionism—as the grotesque outgrowth of supernaturalism itself, unique to its peculiar credulity and unthinkable in the Lennonesque imaginings of a world without religion.

### THE LESSON OF THE WITCH-HUNT

As the study of the witch-hunt developed it accrued a vast array of evidence, and with it a large number of differing interpretations. Witchcraft historians abandoned the hope of finding a single explanation and turned their attention to understanding the interaction of a very wide array of different factors that all appeared to be important. By the 1990s, a general history of the witch-hunt had to consider religion, heresy, confessionalism, kingship, state-building and localism, concepts of magistracy and authority, juridical practice and its changes, torture, psychology and fantasy, the role of language, gender and patriarchy, childrearing, domestic management and government, village community and its tensions, regional cultures (highland/lowland, Mediterranean/northern European), medicine, early science, printing and the circulation of text, elite and popular culture, entertainment, urban and rural economies, demographic change, climate change, and more. It is now accepted that the witch-hunt can only be explained through a highly complex multi-causal analysis. Robin Briggs' *Witches and Neighbours*, the book used by

Harris, was seminal in its attempt to comprehensibly interweave so many strands into a nuanced and multifaceted account.<sup>55</sup> It is striking that Harris has managed to take so little from it.

Far from offering an efficient and obvious polemic to either side of the God debate, the consideration of the witch-hunt might seem to be leading us in circles. For those seeking ready examples either of religion's special evil or of its particular goodness, witch-hunting, which seems to promise so much at first glance, will disappoint on closer examination. Hard evidence as to the singular guilt of supernaturalism proves surprisingly elusive even though we can accept that without magical beliefs themselves none of the tens of thousands of those executed would have suffered their fate. The attempt to exonerate the Church requires that whole areas of the development of witch beliefs and judicial process be written out of the history, and yet the culpability of the faith cannot be located in any characteristic unique to it. Examining the witch-hunt through the lens of the God debate will be met with a frustrating round of interpretation and qualification, example and counter-example, conflicting evidence and bewildering shifts over time and geography. But this is an indication only of the inadequacy of that lens, shaped as it is to serve the myopic need for a simplistic 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question of religion's evil.

But if it cannot be argued that the mere sense that non-material forces are active in the world leads naturally to a deranging of reason and a violent excess of superstitious fear, what happens when those nebulous beliefs are honed and given the edges of doctrine and dogma?

## NOTES

1. *TEoF*, 80–81.
2. *Ibid.*, 87, 80.
3. A. C. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 117.
4. *TGD*, 23.
5. *GiNG*, 232–233; *TNA*, 112; *TGA*, 240.
6. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things*, 116–117.
7. *Ibid.*, 119–121.
8. Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995, 1st ed. 1841); Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1st

- ed. 1935); William Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe* (London: Longmans, 1910, 1st ed. 1865); Andrew Dixon White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960, 1st ed. 1896).
9. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132.
  10. For example, Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse* (1843); George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*, vol. III (1845); Joseph Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozesse im Littelalter, und die Entstehung der Grossen Hexenverfolgung* (1900).
  11. Howard Williams, *The Superstition of Witchcraft* (London: Longman, Green, Longman Roberts & Green, 1865); White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, I, 350–361; J. Mitchell and John Dickie, *The Philosophy of Witchcraft* (Paisley: Murray and Stewart, 1839), 15–16; John M. Taylor, *The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut 1647–1697* (New York: Grafton, 1908), 1, 19.
  12. James Russell Lowell, *Among My Books* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1877), 85; White, *History*, I, 351; Williams, *The Superstition of Witchcraft*, 7; Mitchell and Dickie, *The Philosophy of Witchcraft*, vi; Samuel Drake, *Annals of Witchcraft in New England* (Boston, 1869), xvii.
  13. Henry Ferguson, *Essays in American History* (New York: James Pott & Co., 1894), 68; see also Williams, *The Superstition of Witchcraft*, 3–4; Mitchell and Dickie, *The Philosophy of Witchcraft*, 2–8, 15; Charles W. Upham, *Lectures on Witchcraft Comprising a History of the Delusion at Salem* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831), 249.
  14. Ferguson, *Essays in American History*, 68–69; W. H. Davenport Adams, *Witch, Warlock and Magician: Historical Sketches in Magic and Witchcraft in England and Scotland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), 203; Mitchell and Dickie, *The Philosophy of Witchcraft*, vi.
  15. Taylor, *The Witchcraft Delusion*, 8.
  16. Charles Upham, *Lectures on Witchcraft, Comprising a History of the Delusion in Salem in 1692* (Boston: Carter, Hendee and Babcock, 1831), 153–156; Lovell, *Among My Books*, 93–98; Mackay.
  17. Lecky, *A History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism*, 12–13.
  18. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
  19. *Ibid.*, 8.
  20. E. Lynn Linton, *Witch Stories* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1861), 5.
  21. Williams, *The Superstition of Witchcraft*, 5; Linton, *Witch Stories*, 5

22. Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, 158–159; Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2003), 30–31.
23. Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, chapter 1, esp. 16–17.
24. Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, 30.
25. Mackey, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 386–387.
26. Herbert Casson, *The Crime of Credulity* (New York: Peter Eckler, 1901), 38.
27. Bertrand Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian* (1957, reprint, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 16.
28. For example, Brian Levack's excellent synthesis, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, published first in 1987 and in a second edition in 1995, gives the total number of executions as around 60,000, whilst *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials* (2003), by Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and William Monter, revises even this downwards to offer a figure of 30,000–35,000 executions throughout Christendom for the period 1560–1660. See Levack, *The Witch-Hunt*, 24–25; Ankarloo, Clark, and Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 12–16.
29. Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1996), 118. Despite writing in the mid-1990s, Sagan's only cited source for the witch-hunt was Norman Cohn's important, but superceded study, *Europe's Inner Demons*, published in 1975. See also David Mills, *Atheist Universe: Why God Didn't Have a Thing to Do With It* (Bloomington, 2003), 68.
30. Haught cites five sources only one of which was published after 1973, see James A. Haught, *Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990, Kindle Edition), location 444–454; 1194.
31. *TPA*, 121 (Twain), 221–222 (Sagan), 443 (Warraq).
32. *TEoF*, 87; *TPA*, 459.
33. *TEoF*, 255, n. 19. These comments are not included in *The Portable Atheist*.
34. Ankarloo, Clark, and Monter, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 15.
35. *Ibid.*, 16–17.
36. *TEoF*, 88.
37. For example see *TNA*, 112; *TEoF*, 88 (*TPA*, 459); Haught, *Holy Horrors*, location 444–475 (Kindle); Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World*, 118–120 (*The Portable Atheist*, 221–222); Paul Tobin, *The Rejection of Pascal's Wager*, <http://www.rejectionofpascalswager.net/witchhunt.html#2>; White, *Galileo Antichrist*, 22.

38. E. W. Monter, *The Frontiers of Heresy: The Spanish Inquisition from the Basque Lands to Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 267–270.
39. *Ibid.*, 271–272.
40. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, 203–355.
41. *Ibid.*, 371–376.
42. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 92; Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, 371.
43. Monter, *The Frontiers of Heresy*, 261; Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 83; Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, 372.
44. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 92.
45. Monter, *The Frontiers of Heresy*, 259–260.
46. *Ibid.*, 261.
47. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate*, 373.
48. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 93.
49. *TEoF*, 80 (*TPA*, 454).
50. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 102–103; Martin, *Witchcraft and the Inquisition in Venice*, 28.
51. Monter, *The Frontiers of Heresy*, 261–262.
52. Tedeschi, 'Inquisitorial Law and the Witch', 104.
53. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 76–83, quote at 83.
54. Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonisation of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (London: Pimlico, 2005, 1st ed. 1975), 1–4.
55. Other important studies of multicausality in witch-hunting include Levack's, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*; Sharpe's *Instruments of Darkness*; Ankarloo, Clark, and Monter's *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*; Behringer's, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*.





## Faith and the Stake: Heresy and Religious Totalitarianism

‘A pathetic bleating sheep’, this, according Christopher Hitchens, is today’s emasculated ‘moderate’ religion struggling desperately for relevance and influence.<sup>1</sup> A Church required to make its way in a pluralistic culture is a Church naturally enfeebled, for the authority of religious claims has always been founded on the questions not asked—on the absence of alternatives and the absence of challenge. Moderate religions, Hitchens notes, now ingratiate themselves ‘like an unctuous merchant at a bazaar.’ They offer us spiritual elevation and consolation, and repack-age their fables as metaphors, albeit divinely inspired. But they are selling us what they would once have imposed on us by force. ‘We have the right to remember’, Hitchens insists, ‘how barbarically they behaved when they were strong and were making an offer that people could not refuse.’<sup>2</sup> Metaphor is the resort of a Church no longer able to ‘simply burn or silence anybody who asked any inconvenient questions.’<sup>3</sup>

For century after century, the New Atheists claim, religions did just that. To look at the history of religion is to understand that it is driven to suppress and dominate.<sup>4</sup> Again the trigger words are widely in evidence: ‘the Inquisition’, ‘heresy’, ‘burning’, ‘the stake’, ‘torture’, ‘*auto-da-fé*.’ Again we are required not to explore the accusations but only to remember the convictions. And as they range across millennia of human history—encompassing such cases as the suppression of heresy and paganism in Christian Antiquity, the medieval Inquisition, the war on Catharism, the Crusades, the violence of the Reformation, the burning of Giordano Bruno and the condemnation of Galileo, the casting out of

Spinoza, the struggle against Darwinism and the Scopes trial—we are to understand that the persecution of heterodoxy has been fundamental to religion, and that tolerance of those with differing views is merely the suppression of its most basic urge.

### WHY IS PERSECUTION NATURAL TO RELIGION?

The New Atheism imagines a particular one-way relationship between faith and power that accounts for the perennality of religious persecution. Religion comes to power predefined. Its characteristics, concerns, dogmas and belligerences are assumed to be fully formed, so that access to power provides only dynamism and coercive force. No sense emerges that religion might be shaped by empowerment. Instead, religion always remakes government in its own image, to the detriment of pluralism and freedom.

Christopher Hitchens offers the most simplistic approach: religion is totalitarian. It has always fetishised subjection, and faith becomes theocracy when the fetish is given access to state coercion and violence. So, in the pre-Enlightenment world,

Orwell's most imaginative projection of the totalitarian idea – the offence of 'thoughtcrime' – was a commonplace. An impure thought, let alone a heretical one, could lead to your being flayed alive.<sup>5</sup>

Michel Onfray fleshes out a similar picture. Early Christianity, he tells us, became another name for the ignorant and misanthropic 'ravings' of one man: St Paul of Tarsus. When the Roman emperor Constantine converted around 312, Christianity's sexual prurience and anti-intellectualism was so sharply honed that it could list its targets the instant it was offered the power of life and death. The 'ferocious repression' of pagan culture and Christian heresy ensued, and when the emperor Justinian (*d.* 565) outlawed paganism entirely, he was merely 'hammering in the final nail' in the totalitarian confining of independent thought. Thereafter 'for at least thousand years, philosophising became dangerous.'<sup>6</sup> For Sam Harris religious persecution also holds 'no mystery at all.' To understand the medieval Inquisition we need only read Deuteronomy 13, with its demand that we kill all apostates, and imagine actually *believing* that it was written by God.<sup>7</sup> The 'doctrine of murder and rapine' was always present, and, through blind faith in holy writ, empowered Christianity naturally gravitated towards it.<sup>8</sup>

A.C. Grayling's interpretation appears at first to be notably inconsistent. 'The instinct of religion, when it has power', he asserts in *What Is Good?* 'is to coerce compliance with its orthodoxy, and to pursue or punish those who will not conform.'<sup>9</sup> Yet his *Towards the Light* seems to offer an account of how Christianity in power had instead to learn to kill. It first abandoned Deuteronomy 13 and made a principle of toleration, formalised in Constantine's Edict of Milan (313). A persecuting will did emerge, however, in response to the belief in the immanence of Christ's return. How should the world be made ready if some could not be persuaded to the faith? Such was the urgency that the violent eradication of heretics easily appeared a reasonable expedient. 'By the tenth century AD executing heretics, typically by strangling and burning, was a commonplace.'<sup>10</sup> The key to resolving this apparent contradiction may lie in another statement made in *What Is Good?*:

All religions are such that, if they are pushed to their logical conclusions, or if their founding literatures and early traditions are accepted literally, they will take the form of their respective fundamentalisms.<sup>11</sup>

However tolerant early Christianity appeared, it was defined by the 'exclusivity and totality' of its claim over humanity.<sup>12</sup> It learned to persecute as it learned that power could overcome the weakness of trusting its mission to the individual conscience. Or rather, deciding what to do with power was the conduit to exploring the logical conclusions of the religion's totalizing claims, and persecution was the result. Tellingly, Grayling describes Christianity's period of relative tolerance as the 'brief honeymoon' of its marriage to Roman power.<sup>13</sup>

Hector Avelos, in *Fighting Words*, offers the most clearly theorised perspective. Humans fight, he notes, when material or cultural resources are scarce. Religion creates artificial scarce resources to be fought over: 'Inscription' (the claim that a text has been divinely composed or inspired), salvation, holy space and faith group privilege.<sup>14</sup> The New Testament declares itself to be the scarce resource of holy writ, and explicitly warns of the dangers of 'different' and 'contrary' gospels. Thus, the faith heroised textual chauvinism. But the right to define what the inscripturated text is understood to say—the right to define orthodoxy and heresy—is also a scarce resource, and one that 'has proven to be a far more prevalent source of conflict.'<sup>15</sup> Salvation as a scarce resource became urgently problematic when access to it was taken to be hindered

by the activities of heretics, whose example and mission led others from the sanctioned routes by which it was understood to be available.<sup>16</sup>

These accounts of heresy-hunting remain within the traditional spheres of historical analysis. However, some recent atheist works adopt a different approach influenced by Richard Dawkins' characterisation of religion as a 'virus of the mind.' The psychologist, Darrel W. Ray, gives religious persecution a pseudo-virologic explanation as a strategy that confers advantages on the infecting agent. Like viruses that are weakened by internal mutations, religions are weakened by doctrinal deviations. Heretical mutations, then, provoke the swift development of creeds as 'antibodies' identifying threats to be neutralised. The most powerful antibody available is fundamentalism and a religion virus can undergo a 'permanent fundamentalist mutation' as Catholicism did with the creation of the Jesuit Order and the Inquisition. The fact of religious coexistence is explained either by equally matched viruses reaching a stand-off ('viral balance'), or by a weaker virus protecting itself by mutating into something that appears non-threatening. Heresy-hunting is the most natural of the behaviours of religion viruses; the only question is whether political power will allow it to be lethal.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, for Hitchens and Harris heresy-hunting is simply what religions do in their implacable need both to dominate and mobilise their votaries into violent complicity. For Avelos and Ray heresy-hunting it is simply what religions do, as the inevitable result of the intense competitiveness that is their natural state. Onfray and Grayling overlay extremely simplified narratives onto a thousand years of history to establish the origins of a single, continuous activity taken to define Christianity thereafter. In each case, historical context is entirely absent or soon lost.

Two prejudiced assumptions are, I think, especially prone to limit the questions New Atheists ask about religious persecution. The first is explicitly stated in Avelos' use of scarce resource theory. Non-religious conflict is conducted over scarcities that 'exist, or can exist', whereas religion, he believes, is a more 'tragic' source of violence because it is artificial and, in the end, meaningless.<sup>18</sup> Conflicts over supposedly holy books, or over whether God or the Devil made the earth, appear objectively misdirected, wasteful and even absurd—oft-repeated excesses, easily identified as belonging to predetermined categories of superstition. Such conflict might burst out of any historical circumstance, but the New Atheists need not question it too deeply because it tells them nothing more than that the period in question *was religious*. The second assumption

concerns belief and the relationship between believer, religious principle and text, and involves a significant inconsistency. When New Atheists wish to dispute the claim that religions are founded on divinely revealed truths, they point to the infinite malleability of doctrine and scriptural interpretation—evidence, they say, that humans have shaped their gods to express their desires of the moment. When, however, they want to argue that destructive behaviour is innate within religion, they insist on absolute rigidity. Believers now become slaves to the bloodlust of Deuteronomy or to the savage neuroses of St Paul, whilst religion, as slave-master, appears curiously animate as a force driving people for its own purposes. The first argument becomes a point that can no longer be conceded lest it offers too much ground to those theists who claim that religious atrocities must be understood as the actions of flawed human beings who have failed the ideals of their faith. Religious oppression must instead be presented as self-generating, contingent only on a ‘faith’, as some sort of entity, having accumulated the resources to do so.

In common with all of the anti-religionist black legends, raising the issue of heresy is not really about the past. Rather, history is the lens through which to view the instincts of religion, displayed when its adherents felt no need to hide them. Today they apparently do, but it must not be doubted that the instincts remain. Thus Sam Harris challenges today’s biblical literalists to reveal their true selves by considering the medieval Cathars:

There seems to have been nothing wrong with these people apart from their attachment to certain unorthodox beliefs about the creation of the world. But heresy is heresy. Any person who believes that the bible contains the infallible word of God will understand why these people had to be put to death.<sup>19</sup>

Cathar doctrine, Harris notes, was a curious mix of extreme asceticism in theory and a far more benign moderation in practice. Rejecting the material world as the creation of Satan rather than God, those who underwent the Cathar baptism—the *perfecti*—were to renounce physical comfort in favour of celibacy, destitution, fasting and veganism. Yet from this rather inauspicious start developed a remarkably inclusive faith. The Cathars recognised just how difficult such strictures were for most people, so they accorded the majority of adherents the status of *perfecti*-in-waiting. Whilst the virtuoso *perfecti* deprived themselves, the ordinary votaries—the

*credentes*—lived normal lives until ‘safely on their deathbeds.’ There they were baptised and joined the *perfecti* to reap the rewards of extreme asceticism whilst only having to actually endure it for a few final hours.<sup>20</sup> What possible threat, then, did these heretics offer beyond allowing themselves a somewhat odd view of creation? And yet, Harris assures us, this was sufficient to bring down upon them the full murderous wrath of the Catholic Church even though it knew their lives were otherwise blameless. If Deuteronomy is the word of God, then God is unequivocal, and the sin of heterodoxy can have no mitigation. If modern Christians truly believe that the word of God sits on their own bookshelves, then, as they survey the eradication of Catharism by fire and sword, they can only acknowledge its justice, and vicariously indulge in the inquisitors’ persecuting zeal. So ingrained is the totalitarianism of religion that it merely requires a touch to the correct logical trigger to set its impulses in motion.

The real history of heresy-hunting, as it is coming to be understood, suggests that the explanation is not nearly so simple. The notion of perennial, self-generating religious intolerance simply cannot account for what we know to have been the circumstances in which persecution arose. It is a hypothesis that discourages the consideration of those other social and cultural factors that intuition, and the most cursory glance at the evidence, suggest must be important. As an interpretive approach, it can only severely limit our understanding of what happened to our ancestors, and what continues to happen now.

To consider these issues in more depth, we can look at the period often understood to epitomise the terrible empowering of religious totalitarianism in Europe: the high Middle Ages and the time of the Inquisition. As with the history of witchcraft, the picture uncovered by historians is strikingly different to that imagined by anti-religionism, and the work of one historian, in particular, is especially relevant to this part of the God debate.

### MEDIEVAL HERESY AND THE PERSECUTING SOCIETY

Thirty years ago, R.I. Moore, one of the foremost authorities on heresy in the Middle Ages, set out to challenge our understanding of heresy-hunting. We assume, he noted, that heretics must have been persecuted simply ‘because there was so many of them’, and that ‘it was in some way natural or appropriate, or at any rate inevitable, that the medieval Church should seek to suppress religious dissent by force.’<sup>21</sup> Yet in an important and widely influential book, *The Formation of a Persecuting*

*Society* (1987), Moore sought to expose the weakness of these assumptions. In effect, he set out to dismantle the interpretive foundations upon which the New Atheist sense of the perennality of religious persecution now attempts to stand.

Moore's point was not to question the reality or significance of persecution in medieval society. Quite the reverse. He argued that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a turning point during which developed the formalised stigmatisation of marginalised groups such as heretics, Jews, lepers, homosexuals and prostitutes. The key to analysing these forms of victimisation, he argued, is to understand that Europe changed profoundly in the high Middle Ages. It *became* a persecuting society then and remained one thereafter.

To see what this means we need first to understand that the impression created by the New Atheists is categorically wrong. The killing of heretics was not automatic and not, as Grayling would have it, 'commonplace' by the end of the first millennium. He offers the example of Priscillian of Avila, suspected of Manichaeism and executed as a witch in 385, as the first of the many that would see the execution of heretics quickly become normal. Moore also cited the case, but to stress instead that Priscillian 'remained not only the first Western European to be burned as a heretic...but *the only one* before...1022.'<sup>22</sup> After the fading of Arianism in the early sixth century, he noted, heresy more or less disappeared as a concern in the West 'for a period as long as that which separates the reign of Elizabeth I from the present day.'<sup>23</sup>

This gap had always been recognised by historians. But Moore took issue with the way it had been interpreted. It was assumed that, had heresy been present, the Church would have been driven by its natural instincts to pursue it, and so 'if heretics were not persecuted between the seventh and the tenth centuries it was because there were none.' The sudden re-emergence of heresy-hunting in the high Middle Ages could only be evidence of a real growth in the numbers of offenders. Were heretics the only targets of the upsurge in persecution, such an interpretation might be plausible, but for Moore it simply stretched credibility that heretics, Jews, lepers, homosexuals and prostitutes had simultaneously all become so markedly more visible as to provoke a reaction by their very presence.<sup>24</sup> Instead, what changed was a general hardening of attitudes towards those at the margins of medieval society. If so, the question for historians was recast. Since numerous forms of marginality must have existed in pre-eleventh-century Europe without authorities deciding on the need for systematic persecution, why did that change?

It is, Moore noted, ‘meaningless’ to argue that heresy would have been persecuted earlier had it only existed. Heresy *cannot* exist until the Church decides to actively define certain beliefs as being so. For the Church, people became heretics only when they refused to accept correction from a bishop. At this point those previously only in error became ‘obdurate’, arrogantly choosing to privilege their own judgement over the authority of the Church. It stands to reason that an extensive amount of religious variation existed in the early Middle Ages, not least because the Church was at that point structurally predisposed to allow it. With Rome still far from wielding the political power to match its cultural pre-eminence, no central authority existed to demand the universal enforcement of orthodoxy. Bishops ruled their dioceses as personal fiefdoms and heterodoxy emerged in local contexts, expressing local traditions and concerns within communities of whom the clergy were often sympathetic members. The question, then, is why the Church became so much more sensitive to heterodoxy as, through a new assertion of its authority, to *create* heresy?

### WHAT WAS MEDIEVAL HERESY?

In popular culture, we have very clear impressions of what happened to heretics, but very little sense of what it was that they actually believed. There is perhaps even an implicit tendency to conflate heresy with a kind of scepticism—with a healthy objection to the clergy’s monopoly of spiritual wisdom and perhaps even a resistance to some of the more ‘fantastical’ elements of Christian belief. Thus, Hitchens celebrates the simple bravery of one heretic willing to affront the Church with the ‘conscientious sanity and lucidity’ of her own intellectual labours:

In the village of Montailou, during one of the great medieval persecutions, a woman was asked by the Inquisitors to tell them from whom she had acquired her heretical doubts about hell and resurrection. She must have known that she stood in terrible danger of a lingering death administered by the pious, but she responded that she took them from nobody and had evolved them all by herself.<sup>25</sup>

It appeals to anti-religionist sentiments to imagine the great edifice of the Church threatened by the stolid common sense of those it sought to dominate. Also implicit is the assumption that the Church’s own sense of orthodoxy was so clear that heresy was instantly recognisable.



The reality of medieval heresy was very different, the line between saint and heresiarch often very fine indeed.

The first burnings took place in Orléans in 1022 when among the clergy a gnostic sect was discovered which appeared to deny Jesus' incarnation and the power of the sacraments.<sup>26</sup> Three years later, at Arras in Artois, a group of laymen claimed to accept only apostolic scripture as authoritative and to reject the need for baptism.<sup>27</sup> In 1028, a sect of extreme ascetics were uncovered at the castle at Monforte d'Alba near Turin who appeared to deny the humanity of Christ, and certainly denied the authority of the priesthood.<sup>28</sup> A former priest called Tanchelm rose to dominance in Antwerp around 1110, preaching that the Church was a brothel and that both sacrament and tithe should be boycotted.<sup>29</sup> In 1116, a wandering monk named Henry of Lausanne preached the town of Le Mans into open rebellion against its 'corrupt' clergy.<sup>30</sup> A former Alpine village priest, Peter of Bruys, active from around 1119, led his supporters in the destruction of churches, altars and crosses.<sup>31</sup> These heresies shared the sense that there existed a pristine Christian ethic reflected in forms of biblical literalism and personal austerity. Thus, the men of Arras discounted baptism because salvation lay not in ritual but in living according to the true principles of the apostles.<sup>32</sup> Tanchelm's campaign against the sacraments was based in the sense that they were invalidated if performed by a sinful priest.<sup>33</sup> For Peter of Bruys, God was invoked just as well 'in a tavern' as a church. Christ's torture made the crucifix unworthy of veneration and infant baptism was meaningless since a child was incapable of making a commitment to God.<sup>34</sup>

The sentiment itself was not heretical. Indeed, it was shared extensively within the eleventh- and twelfth-century Church, and became one basis for the great reform movement that emerged then.

### SEARCHING FOR A NEWLY OLD FAITH

The religious theme of the age was the search for the apostolic life. Whilst the sense of a conflict between personal spiritual imperatives and the precepts of the institutional Church has been a constant within Christianity, it has at certain times become sufficiently widespread and pronounced as to characterise a historical moment. The eleventh and twelfth centuries were one such moment, in which strict adherence to gospel principles and the exemplars of the lives of the apostles and the

Desert Fathers assumed a particular appeal. The apostolic life was variously interpreted, but at its common heart was taken to lie a contemplative and missionising faith, based in a religious community which held all property in common or even renounced it altogether.

This needs to be understood in the context of the profound changes taking place in the high Middle Ages. Feudalism emerged as a system by which a king or lord granted land and protection to an underling in return for service. The 'vassal' received the land's income and jurisdiction over its inhabitants. By the eleventh century, feudalism was developing into a complex and often fractious web of enfeoffments and sub-enfeoffments that extended vassalage into the very lowest levels of the manorial economy.<sup>35</sup> The same period saw very high population growth with the transformation of agriculture meet it and encourage it further. But for over three hundred years, it did not outpace the increase in production, a situation which sustained a much larger body of non-agricultural workers such that artisanal, intellectual and administrative specialisation could flourish. One important consequence was the re-emergence of towns as environments for such activity and as centres of commerce, and this in turn saw the re-establishment of money as both a practical and a cultural force. It was a process into which the peasantry itself was increasingly drawn as their feudal lords exacted their dues not only in labour and produce but also in cash.

The restructuring of agriculture was accompanied by a proliferation of churches and the development of the parish system. The village church became the focus of new communities, its presence, and that of its sacraments and liturgical calendar, more intimate and imposing than that of the dispersed diocesan churches that had preceded it. Yet church buildings and personnel had also become subject to enfeoffment. Where churches were founded by kings and noblemen, or where they existed on lands subject to their authority, those laymen had the right to select clergy, who were bound by fealty as any feudal vassal. As private property, church buildings, clerical positions and their incomes became part of the feudal economy. Like any other asset, they could be inherited, sold, lent or leased. At the apex of the system, kings and princes became used to making and unmaking bishops.

The sense of the need to rediscover a primitive Christianity was greatly accentuated in response to these changes. In a period of increasing, and increasingly obvious, disparities of wealth and power, its tensions were expressed in the attractions of the apostolic life. Virtue lay not only in austere devotion but also in the renunciation of social change—of lordly

power, property and money. In their different ways, heretical groups such as the men of Arras or the followers of Tanchelm sought to live according to idiosyncratic versions of these ideals. Yet, equally, the rite of passage of many orthodox spiritual heroes was the voluntary repudiation of feudal privilege and wealth, and the apostolic sentiment drove those who aimed at reforming the Church itself.<sup>36</sup>

There was no single reform movement. Besides heresy, some earlier manifestations are found in the renewal of monasticism, which, through new foundations such as the Cluniac, Carthusian and Cistercian orders, promoted the life of the poor, unworldly and abstinent monk. These values were pursued most rigorously of all by the hermits who lived on the periphery of most monastic communities, seeking to emulate the lonely spiritual combats waged by the Desert Fathers.<sup>37</sup> The reforming sentiment was also key to the extension of papal power. The aim was to purify the Church by disentangling it from worldly values. The elevated position of the clergy should be manifested in their cultural and physical separation from the rest of society, and the rituals of the faith insulated against the polluting touch of those mired in 'fleshly' corruptions. Thus, the clarion calls of the movement were against the then widespread practices of clerical cohabitation with women (either wives or concubines) and simony (the practice of exchanging gifts or money for clerical office).<sup>38</sup>

Pope Leo IX (r. 1049–1054) and his successors sought to re-establish papal influence through synods, the issuing of canons against simony and clerical marriage, and the proliferation of legates at the courts of Europe. But they also began to assert papal supremacy. Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) extended the reform agenda to include an attack on the practice of lay investiture, whereby kings presented new bishops with their insignia of office, in effect presuming to grant them their spiritual power along with their temporal estates and jurisdictions. To Gregory, the princes of the Church were set above all others, and he ultimately took the view that the pope was empowered to depose even the Holy Roman Emperor. In 1070 he attempted just that with, in the end, disastrous consequences for his papacy. But the enhancement of papal power since 1049 had been very real.

### REFORM AND HERESY

In pursuing its goals, however, the reform movement encouraged the very forms of agitation that would later be condemned as heretical when practised by figures such as Tanchelm and Henry of Lausanne. The

best-known examples are the twenty-year dispute over the diocese of Milan and the wandering hermit preachers. In Milan, clerical marriage was upheld as a noble tradition and diocesan lands and offices had been enfeoffed since 987. In May 1057, a deacon named Arialdo preached such a fiery sermon against these ‘abuses’ that a riot ensued. His ‘Patarene’ movement formed a rival apostolic community and received the support of four reforming popes. The second Patarene leader, the layman, Erlembald Cotta, was appointed Pope Alexander II’s representative and presented with the ‘banner of St Peter’. When he was killed, Pope Gregory VII declared him a martyr. The wandering preachers roamed widely, often barefoot and dressed in rags, delivering thunderous calls to penitence and castigating clerical abuses. Theirs were self-conscious appeals to the ‘poor of Christ’, their credibility residing in the conspicuousness both of their poverty and their independence. Such preachers unsettled many in the Church, but famous examples such as Robert of Arbrissel (*c.* 1045–1116), Bernard of Tiron (1046–1117) and Norbert of Xanten (*c.* 1080–1134), had received papal commissions to preach reform and penitence wherever they travelled.

For Moore, the papal reform movement testifies eloquently to the internal tensions from which the ‘problem’ of heresy emerged. On the one hand, it was ‘revolutionary in the classical sense’, employing popular power to discipline the clerical elite.<sup>39</sup> So in 1075, Gregory VII ordered that an uncelibate or simoniac priest should be shown ‘neither respect nor obedience’ and his services boycotted.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, encouraging underlings to hold opinions on such matters might provoke them into thinking too much. Did, for example, the sacraments performed by an unworthy priest lose their efficacy? This was the claim of the Patarenes, yet to the papacy it resembled much too closely the ancient heresy of Donatism, and in 1059 it endorsed instead St Augustine’s claim that the efficacy of the sacraments lay with God, not the probity of the clergyman. The distinction remained a fine one, however; one that was often lost in the ferment of reformist opprobrium. The most rigorous of orthodox criticisms before 1059 became heresy, thereafter.

Over time papal reform became far more narrowly focused on the issue of clerical independence and lay investiture. By the turn of the twelfth century, simony had become, in the words of one historian, a ‘ghost issue’ from which reforming energy had been diverted.<sup>41</sup> Concern with the purity of ritual had little effect on clerical competence or parishioners’ experience of the faith. Yet the propaganda of papal reform had

sought to stir the consciences of the laity. The ‘problem’ of heresy in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, then, owed much to the raising of expectations that could never be realised.<sup>42</sup>

For Moore, the arrival of Henry of Lausanne at Le Mans is emblematic of the link. His clothing and demeanour declared his mission as a preacher of poverty and penitence, and he was welcomed by Le Mans’s Bishop Hildebert, himself a reformer and friend of Robert of Arbrissel. It is likely that Hildebert allowed Henry to preach in order to bolster his own campaign to reform his cathedral clergy. He clearly got more than he bargained for, struggling to reassert control on his return from the Easter synod in Rome. But Henry had been welcomed precisely because he was recognisable as a carrier of the apostolic message.<sup>43</sup>

The process by which issues of authority and social boundaries pushed apostolicism into heresy is best demonstrated by the emergence of the Waldensian movement. Legend has it that around 1173 a rich usurer in Lyon named Valdès experienced a dramatic conversion upon hearing a song which told of how St Alexius had renounced his wealth in favour of beggary. Valdès immediately abandoned his own wealth and family to pursue a life of holiness. The movement he inspired held scripture to be the inerrant guide to human behaviour, Valdès commissioning translations into French so that it might be directly available. Styling themselves as ‘the Poor’, the Waldensians embraced beggary and believed they were commanded to missionise, becoming itinerant preachers.<sup>44</sup> The Poor considered themselves absolutely orthodox, Valdès making an acceptable profession of faith at a diocesan council in Lyon in 1180. They also took it upon themselves to preach against the dualist ‘Cathar’ heresy that appeared to have imported a form of Manichaeism into southern France and Northern Italy.<sup>45</sup> Yet by 1184 the Waldensians had been excommunicated as schismatics. The Church forbade lay preaching except by special dispensation. Valdès gained an audience with Pope Alexander III in 1179 who gave his approval to the movement’s vow of poverty but forbade them to preach without the (unlikely) permission of local clergy. Forced to choose between their mission and their obedience, the Waldensians rebelled and were excommunicated at the Council of Verona. Whilst the Poor initially hoped for a reconciliation, as their ostracism continued, the movement began to move into forms of sacramental heresy in line with its hardening attitude to the clergy.<sup>46</sup> At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the Waldensians were listed among the enemies of the Catholic faith.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the problems with the New Atheist picture of the relationship between religion and heterodoxy become clear. They imagine religion to be a static, clearly bounded intellectual monolith preserving itself through the instant, ruthless suppression of anything that might threaten to crack it open. Indeed, they imply that such ruthlessness was entirely necessary since the ideological foundations of religions are always so weak that none could survive pluralism on their own merits. Undoubtedly, the high Middle Ages was in no way a period of easy tolerance or general open-mindedness. It was not a period of religious peace, and certainly not a period in which religion could ever be an indifferent matter. But neither was it yet an age of religious certainty in which doctrine and the Church's rights of interference were fixed like the entrenched clauses of some Christian constitution against which every idiosyncrasy of belief could be readily measured and anathematised. Heresy emerged not in a totalitarian power play across clear doctrinal fault lines but in the fluidity and uncertainty of social and economic transformation. It was born in the differing responses to the problem, as it has been termed, of 'living Christian' in a changing world.<sup>48</sup>

### THE CATHARS: DID THEY EXIST, AND WHAT DOES IT TELL THE NEW ATHEISM IF THEY DID NOT?

To explore these issues in more depth, let us return to Sam Harris' exemplary victims of religious auto-totalitarianism. The first surviving identification of Catharism in western Europe is a report by Eberwin, prior of Steinfeld, describing the discovery in 1143 of a sect at Cologne that rejected all forms of property, abstained from sex, and refused to eat anything that was the product of coition. Presided over by their own bishop, they practiced a form of baptism, and had their own hierarchy and organisational structure. These heretics claimed that their beliefs were shared by others in 'Greece', and they bore enough similarities to the Bogomil heresy in Byzantium that historians have tended to see the outbreak as early evidence of the spread of dualism from Constantinople to the west. Two decades later, the same heresy was reported as present in Flanders and in France, and had apparently become so strong in the south that its leaders were able to debate openly with orthodox churchmen at Lombers near Albi, and around ten years later to hold a major council of their faith at Saint-Felix-de-Caraman near Toulouse. It was here, and in northern Italy, that Catharism was believed to have

made the most headway. In the highly decentralised and mountainous regions of the Languedoc, Cathars found support and protection among a nobility all but free from monarchical control. Such was the spread and influence of the faith that it has often been described not so much as a heretical sect, but as a shadow-Church.

Two Catholic preaching missions to the Languedoc in 1178 and 1181 met with only very limited success, and the region became a constant source of frustration for almost half a century. In 1207, Innocent III turned to a policy of coercion where persuasion had failed, calling upon French lords to use force against the Cathars who had proved themselves beyond the reach of reason. Two years later the murder of the papal legate sparked a crusade that, used as a pretext for the imposition of French royal power, pursued the heretics at tremendous cost to the territory and its people. Yet it was probably the Inquisitions, active from the 1230s, that were most effective in suppressing the Cathars. A long process of attrition, in the end, transformed the wandering *perfecti* from open missionaries to furtive renegades. By the 1320s, the movement had effectively been destroyed, and the sole remaining *perfectus*, Guillaume Bélibaste, was betrayed to the Inquisition and burned at the castle of Villeroque-Termenés.

At least, such was the standard position of Cathar history at the time when Harris published *The End of Faith*. Research being carried out then and since has now raised fundamental questions as to the picture we have for so long had of the movement. They are controversial, but if borne out, they have some notable consequences for our assumptions as to the nature of religion and religious conflict. For some historians now believe Catharism to be revealed as a myth.

When medieval clerics attempted to understand heresy, they naturally looked for guidance to the Church Fathers. Manichaeism, a Babylonian dualist faith described by St Augustine of Hippo, held a particular terror, and it bore many apparent similarities to what would become known as Catharism. It seemed self-evident, then, that Augustine's enemies had resurfaced to once more blight the faith.<sup>49</sup> Historians have long been wary of such assessments, yet most accepted that a dualist tradition could be traced through a number of eastern sects to the Bogomils, and thence perhaps to western Europe.<sup>50</sup> What was not in doubt was that by the twelfth century a strong and organised dualist faith was present there, its existence a very real challenge to the Catholic Church.<sup>51</sup>

Even this apparent certainty is now disputed. For example, the historian of heresy in the Languedoc, Mark Pegg, argues that the entire study of Catharism has been distorted by the common tendency to see religions as hermetically sealed packages of intelligible ideas, elaborate and cogent discourses, and distinctive (and consistent) attitudes. As such they might be transmitted from place to place and time to time without being 'contaminated by material existence or historical specificity.' Religions shape the local worlds to which they travel, not the other way around. Thus historians, Pegg believes, have too often studied heresy 'as though ideas wander over landscapes and centuries like loose hot-air balloons.'<sup>52</sup> These essentially unwitting biases have primed us to look less deeply than we ought at the processes by which medieval records of heresy were written.

Greater sensitivity to these processes has dramatically altered the historical picture. For example, the churchmen tended to conflate heresies they encountered under convenient catch-alls—the most convenient of all being, in the end, 'Cathar'—rather than examine in depth their nuances and differences, or the local contexts in which they emerged. This, it is argued, can be traced to the new influence of university learning in the period. Clerics were trained in the technique of the *disputatio* (disputation), in which the aim was to provide a complete defence of a proposition by rebutting an equally complete contrary. The tendency was to create an ideal opponent rather than be limited to the arguments of a real one. The Church Fathers had already provided full, and thus authoritative, exposés of heretical doctrine. Clerics used contemporary heretical groups as foils upon which to hang characteristics already determined, and, with the development of the professional literature of heresy, the sense that the Church faced a widely dispersed but single Manichaean movement became increasingly entrenched.<sup>53</sup> In 1178 it received official endorsement by the Third Lateran Council which condemned 'in Gascony and the regions of Albi and Toulouse and in other places the loathsome heresy of those some call the Cathars, others the Patarenes, others the Publicani, and others by different names...'<sup>54</sup>

Beneath this topsoil of clerical fantasy, it is now claimed, strata of real history may be uncovered if the excavation is pursued without 'the *Cathari* in hand.'<sup>55</sup> Pegg argues that the heresy persecuted so violently in the Languedoc was not something identifiable as Catharism, but the much more informal local practice of designating certain men and woman as standing out by virtue of their holiness. These were the



‘good men’ and ‘good women’ referred to constantly in the inquisitorial records from which mention of ‘Cathars’ is entirely lacking. The good man was marked out by his dress and behaviour, both of which expressed an essential moderation by which his humanity was tempered. He was a preacher, active in the public squares of the towns and villages of the region, and performed rituals of ‘consolation’ for the dying. But in other ways, the good man was quite different from the Cathar perfect. He did not renounce meat, eggs and cheese (even if he might avoid them), commonly received gifts of food, and fasted only in moderation; he supported himself through farming or a trade and might possess lands and receive rents.<sup>56</sup> The doctrines of the good men are uncertain, but evidence of dualism before the Albigensian Crusade is weak. At the debate in Lombers in 1165, leading good men affirmed a theology orthodox in many aspects, but rejecting the authority of Old Testament whilst veering into grey areas regarding the Eucharist and infant baptism. They were, however, prepared to denounce the Church hierarchy as corrupt and to assert their own superior, if not exclusive, holiness.<sup>57</sup>

For Pegg, this points to the nature of the cultural impasse reached in the encounters of the churchmen and the good men. For the churchmen issues of doctrine were paramount. They assumed, because their training demanded it, a structure and coherence to the good men’s beliefs, one that revealed their moral status. But for the good men holiness was manifested most importantly in demeanour and courteous interaction. The small communities of the Languedoc were organised around bewilderingly complex webs of rights and entitlements that could only be negotiated through ‘the day-to-day, moment to moment’ performance of an idealised form of courtliness by which people acknowledged each other’s honourable status: what was known as ‘*cortezia*’. In a world in which stability was best protected by the avoidance of excessive behaviour and by the prudent and restrained assertion of one’s rights and honour, the good men offered exemplars derived from their emulation of Christ. Here Jesus’ message of salvation lay not so much in his sacrifice, but in the example of his mollifying his humanity whilst alive. But the good men did not simply offer a religious rationale for the importance of *cortezia*, instead *cortezia* and holiness were intertwined. The performance of *cortezia* towards a good man—the acknowledgement of his right to be considered godly—quite literally enhanced his holiness, so that the more courtesies he received the holier he became. At the same time, the holiness and honour of the performer was also enhanced. This

was exemplified in the *melhoramen*, a ritualised greeting in which the performer genuflected three times before the good man and asked to be blessed.<sup>58</sup>

Thus particular forms of religiosity developed in the context of Languedocian culture that fell foul of the expectations and misconceptions of the churchmen, who believed them to be heretical and knew what heresy involved. In inquisitorial registers, the *melhoramen*—not a sectarian activity but part of the everyday culture of *cortezia*—became the *melioramentum*, the adoration of a perfect and a sure sign of heretical allegiance; the *consolamen* given to the dying became the Cathar baptism.<sup>59</sup> Moore's *The War on Heresy* (2012) attempts to write the history of heresy-hunting 'forwards', without the foreknowledge of Catharism. Examining each outbreak separately, he finds that not only the evidence for a shadow-Church but also much of the evidence for dualism itself evaporates in local disputes around apostolicism, and in a clerical fantasy the development and institutionalisation of which can be precisely traced. The exact beliefs of the good men remain lost from our sight, but as for Pegg, for Moore the historian's search for coherence threatens to reimpose the expectations of the inquisitors onto societies which did not share their fixation with theological absolutes and which, in their emphasis instead on 'lived holiness', entertained no clear dividing line between Catholic and 'Cathar' until it was forced upon them. A clandestine sect did emerge in the Languedoc, but it did so as a *consequence* of crusade and inquisition. The anti-heretical campaign itself hardened distinctions not previously apparent in a culture which had known no categorical difference between those who supported the good men and wished at their deaths to receive the consolation, and those who only extended towards them courtesy inspired by their demeanour.<sup>60</sup>

Only a flavour of these reinterpretations can be offered here, and they are not uncontested.<sup>61</sup> But the new history of Catharism would seem to offer significant points to be considered. It perhaps only becomes more ironic that the study of medieval heresy—a subject which anti-religionist mythology has treated as so utterly straightforward—should now demand such acute attention to local political and cultural contexts, and should see there the roots of highly specific, nuanced and fluid forms of religiosity manifesting a variety of interactions and oppositions. Pegg's challenge to the chasers of stray intellectual hot-air balloons is even more applicable to those polemicists who see, not only religious ideas, but entire tendencies to evil transmitted from human to human and

civilisation to civilisation as part of the inheritable package of supernatural belief.

If we do now find that the inquisitors' view of heresy reflected reality even less than was once thought, the corollary to understanding this will have been to learn more about the place of heterodoxy within these highly religious communities. It will be a history that dissolves simplistic notions of doctrinal fault lines and the all-consuming importance of religious difference. In the Languedoc or in Lombardy we do not find religion as the New Atheists' cultural acid naturally eating through the human bonds of community and even family, and driving people to suppress even their most basic sympathies. There were those who supported the good men and those who did not but who acknowledged that they were honourable in their conduct. Religious divergence was clearly recognised, but, Moore notes, before the Albigensian Crusade evidence cannot be found that it generated antagonisms of any peculiar significance. Even in these communities, in which religion infused social exchange and was a primary currency of honour, doctrinal difference 'simply did not appear...as a division that need, or should, override the ordinary obligations and loyalties of kinship, neighbourliness and courtesy.'<sup>62</sup>

Persecution of heresy itself sharpened religious difference into a category of overwhelming and potentially lethal social demarcation. The process by which this occurred is one of the histories of religion, albeit one that, as we will now see, does not follow the trajectory anti-religionists might expect. But another important history is found in the ways in which religious difference could be assimilated as a mundane aspect of communities that had equal, if not greater, concerns. If the New Atheism continues to insist that we look to the premodern world—and especially to medieval Europe—in order to see religion uncompromised, and there discern its moral nature, it is obliged to understand both.

### THE COMING OF THE INQUISITIONS

From the mid-twelfth century, the Church did begin to go on the offensive, and the extirpation of false belief did indeed become the explicit goal of a faith that set out to know and regulate much more closely what its people believed. In 1184, Pope Lucius III issued the bull, *Ad abolendam* ('Towards abolishing'). Now bishops were to actively seek heresy out, visiting parishes reported to contain heretics and taking

testimony regarding any that ‘differ from the normal habits of the faithful.’ Where appropriate, legal action was to be taken, with lay authorities commanded to cooperate.<sup>63</sup> *Ad abolendum* is often seen as the founding document of the Inquisitions, for it institutionalised the proactive cleansing of the faith and set out the procedure that would ultimately be adopted by the Church’s infamous anti-heretical elite.

But if Christianity’s violent phobia of heterodoxy cannot be assumed, why was this war declared?

For the New Atheism the answer would again be simple: the increase in the authority of the papacy merely unshackled its natural totalitarianism. Moore, however, argues something radically different. Institutions and mechanisms for heresy-hunting did not emerge out of the political empowering of a pre-existing religious urge. Instead, something like the reverse was the case. The development of centralised political power itself catalysed the pursuit of deviancy and then built further upon it. Persecution honed the techniques of a new kind of governance, and it was the creation not so much of empowered fanaticism (although that was certainly present) as of empowered bureaucracy.

## POLITICS AND PERSECUTION

Along with its social and economic transformations, the high Middle Ages saw profound changes in the nature of government. Traditionally, rulers had founded their authority on personal and ritualistic displays of power.<sup>64</sup> But aura and majesty alone were insufficient to meet the needs of territorial enlargement and imperial ambition. Thus, new techniques of government emerged first in Sicily and England, where conquerors had to impose their rule upon large, and largely alien, territories. Within a century, each would develop centralised administrative structures that enabled the systematic, indeed ruthless, increase of royal power under their respective kings, Roger II (1103–1154) and Henry II (r. 1154–1189). The dramatic increase in the territory of the French Capetian kings under Philip Augustus (r. 1180–1223) was also aided by bureaucratic centralisation and the proliferation of royal officials.<sup>65</sup> Papal authority took a similar shape. Roman primacy was expressed in the language of papal monarchy and made manifest in new administrative capabilities.<sup>66</sup> Beginning in the mid-eleventh century, the academic study of canon law enabled the long-term rationalisation of what had previously been a hotchpotch of assertions from disparate authorities. The Roman

curia came to be seen as the repository of definitive canonical judgments, and the growth of appeals to it was correspondingly massive.<sup>67</sup> Papal assertiveness was also displayed in a new series of Church councils as vehicles for the dissemination of policy, in the appointment of legates to the courts of secular rulers, and the issuing of decretal letters giving the pope's ruling on points of law or announcing policy.<sup>68</sup>

The development of persecution, Moore argues, lay within these changes, not simply in the increase of royal and papal power, but in the reshaping of the concept of authority itself.

Early medieval society had been segmented into localised units (family, village, demesne, diocese) with their own systems of 'accusatorial' justice. An individual brought a charge before a court and undertook to prosecute it on the understanding that he would be punished for malicious accusation should he fail to prove his case. The judicial responsibility of authorities (manorial, ecclesiastical, royal) was to guarantee due process to those who brought them complaints and to enact justice. The role did not imply the active policing of the community. Thus early approaches to heresy were essentially reactive and ad hoc. Bishops responded to its appearance, and their preference was often for persuasion over coercion. Edward Peters, the historian of the Inquisitions, notes that medieval churchmen took seriously the notion that Christian truth must be communicable and so believed that patient instruction was the correct starting point with those in error.<sup>69</sup> Localised responses, then, were determined by the diligence or otherwise of the individual prelate, and were most often marked by leniency and a reluctance to shed blood.

Political centralisation, Moore argues, redefined judicial authority. Emerging states always find their earliest manifestations in new mechanisms for the imposition of order and, because it is to be imposed, the nature of that order must change. Guilt or innocence must now be determined by the absolutes of centrally defined codes, not the more fluid interests of local restitution and mediation. The state arrogates to itself the role of judicial initiator, proactively seeking out criminality on the assumption that it is there to find, and the notion of victimisation transfers from the individual to the system of justice itself. New types of offence emerge, what Moore describes as 'crimes against abstractions.' They are crimes against 'the ruler', against 'the state', against 'morality'; crimes such as treason, fornication or vagrancy, which enable the new regime to justify its authority as the defender of society at large, and so

demand 'power over an ever-greater range of [its] subjects' activities and concerns.'<sup>70</sup> The centralising rulers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries invented or exaggerated just such threats to the community. Jews, lepers, prostitutes and homosexuals all became subject to malign stereotyping as moral dangers, and suffered legal persecution in ways which had not been prominent in the early middle ages.

'Orthodoxy' became an important abstraction for these rulers to defend. Moore offers a succinct illustration from the reign of Henry II of England. In 1165, a group of over thirty heretics from Flanders were apprehended in Oxford. Henry ordered that they be branded, flogged out of the city and denied any help thereafter. Banished in winter without shelter, food or clothing, the heretics all soon perished. In 1166, the king enacted the first secular legislation against heresy since antiquity, prescribing punishment for anyone belonging to the Oxford sect or any who aided them. Why, Moore asks, did Henry enshrine in law measures against a sect that had already been entirely destroyed? The attack on heresy was included in the Assize of Clarendon, which transferred judicial power to the crown by creating a system of travelling royal justices who would pursue criminals using information from local juries. It is no coincidence, Moore believes, that we find a practically redundant, but symbolically powerful, defence of orthodoxy within a document setting out the claims of the new regime. Henry II's anti-heretical laws, like those that would be enacted by other rulers, 'reflected the vigour not of heresy, but of the legislator.'<sup>71</sup>

*Ad abolendum* consolidated a similar shift that had been taking place within the Church since the middle of the twelfth century. In 1145, the precedent of intervention in provincial heretical affairs was set when the papal legate, Alberic of Ostia, travelled to Toulouse, accompanied by St Bernard of Clairvaux, to preach against the supporters of Henry of Lausanne. A council presided over by Pope Eugenius III, at Reims in 1148, abandoned the customary reluctance to shed blood and condemned the followers of the heresiarch, Eon de l'Etoile, to the stake. Fifteen years later a council at Tours, again in response to the situation in Toulouse, commanded that the 'hiding places' in which heretics were assumed to be lurking were now to be actively sought out. It extended culpability, declaring that not only heretics themselves but any who protected them or even had ordinary dealings with them were to be punished as accomplices. A second mission to Toulouse (1178), frustrated by a marked lack of local cooperation, turned to the same legal device

being implemented by Henry II in England. The mission required that clergy and reputable laymen provide a register of everyone they suspected of being heretics or accomplices, and even the names of any they believed susceptible to becoming heretics in the future. It was not a coincidence, for the mission was staffed by officials drawn from Henry's court.<sup>72</sup> This was the procedure—the revival of the ancient Roman *inquisitio*—which *Ad abolendum* sought to standardise.<sup>73</sup>

Anti-heresy received fresh, and by Moore's argument, predictable, impetus in the most dynamic and assertive of the papacies of the high Middle Ages, that of Innocent III. Elected in 1198, Innocent took an elevated view of papal authority, declaring 'I am less than God but more than man; I am he who will judge all and be judged by none.'<sup>74</sup> He was the first pope to make heresy a preoccupation of his reign, and his approach was two-sided. He emphasised the need for the Church to be reconciled with those whose apostolic fervour had carried them too far, but towards the obstinate he advocated the 'exercise [of] the material sword.'<sup>75</sup> A year after his election, he issued a decretal, *Vergentis in senium*, in which he redefined heresy as a form of high treason.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 was the grandest single statement of the bureaucratic reordering of the faith and its claims over the local community. In its wake, Moore notes, Christendom became 'an entirely different world – a world pervaded and increasingly moulded by the well-drilled piety and obedience associated with [our] traditional vision of the "age of faith".'<sup>76</sup> Historians often find canon 21 emblematic. It mandated confession at least once a year and communion at Easter, imposing an obligatory moral investigation on parishioners and an acceptance of clerical authority.<sup>77</sup> Foremost among the rationales offered for this assertive centralisation was the danger of heresy. Lateran IV also stated that heretics 'have various faces indeed, but tails tied onto another.'<sup>78</sup> Any individual heresy was now to be seen as part of a single conspiracy, its once local threat elevated to the entire of Christendom. Now those only suspect were to be excommunicated with the onus upon them to prove their innocence within one year. Oaths of loyalty to public officials would be voided if they refused to take action against heretics. Notoriously, the council sought to build on existing measures against Jews, who were to be denied offices, curfewed over Easter, and were to wear distinctive clothing so they might not mingle with Christians unknown. Integral to the claim to authority, then, was the creation of numerous forms of deviance and the establishment of mechanisms for exclusion.

Imposing responsibility for heresy-hunting on existing diocesan structures proved ineffective. Absentee bishops, bishops with other priorities, clerics hampered by local sympathies and inadequate theological training all contributed to the perceived failure. For Pope Gregory IX (r. 1227–1241), the answer lay in dedicated heresy-hunters; in scholastically trained outsiders better equipped theologically to detect suspect beliefs. But, importantly, they could also be more closely controlled and could avoid amateurish fanaticism.<sup>79</sup> From the late 1230s onwards tribunals were created in areas understood to be breeding grounds of dissent, each headed by either the Dominicans or the Franciscans. By the end of that century, they were established in locations in France, Italy, Sicily and Aragon, whilst the next would see inquisitorial authority extend into Germany, Poland, Bohemia and Portugal. In a number of places, (England, Scotland, Castile) no tribunals would be established, but the historian of medieval heresy, Bernard Hamilton, notes that by the fourteenth century the Inquisitions were coming to be viewed as a normal part of Catholic life.<sup>80</sup>

In 1252, a final innovation turned the Inquisitions into the bodies we now recognise. They were given the power to torture by Pope Innocent IV on the basis that if common criminals were forced to confess and name their accomplices, why should heretics, as ‘the thieves and murderers of souls’, be spared?<sup>81</sup>

Sam Harris sees in the inquisitorial work of the Dominicans the murderous fanaticism that epitomised the Church’s response to heresy.<sup>82</sup> Yet, whatever we might think of the Church’s need to enforce orthodoxy, secularists must abandon the notion that the Inquisitions were staffed with blood-thirsty psychopaths. Their mission understood that the eradication of heresy was best achieved through the reclamation of offenders. To send a heretic to the stake was to admit failure. In the words of Bernard Hamilton,

This is not a subtle distinction: a repentant heretic was never burnt, whereas those who refused to recant normally were. The desire to secure recantations in practice was a severe limitation to the arbitrary exercise by inquisitors of their very wide powers.<sup>83</sup>

The majority of punishments enforced were penances such as badges of shame, obligatory pilgrimages, specified devotions, and, much less frequently, public floggings and imprisonment. They marked out (now ex-)



heretics and subjected them to public humiliation, warning others of the consequences of religious deviation. But they were also a mode of transition back into the orthodox community, a demonstration of Catholic power to legitimise social membership and proof that the ‘central error of heresy was to argue for a space outside or beyond the Church.’<sup>84</sup> As to the stake, a recent study notes,

Executions were not as endemic as popular imagination might have it... of the 5,400 people interrogated in Toulouse between 1245 and 1246, only 206 were known to have been sentenced by inquisitors Bernart de Caux and Jean de Saint-Pierre. Of these, 184 received penitential yellow crosses, 23 were imprisoned for life, and none were sent to the stake. Of the 633 imposed penalties for heresy described in Bernard Gui’s inquisitorial register, the vast majority (about 90 percent) involved penitential yellow crosses, pilgrimages, imprisonments, or combinations thereof; only 41 (6.5 percent) of those Gui interrogated over the years were handed over to secular authorities for execution.<sup>85</sup>

We must not get carried away. However, reluctantly, Bernard Gui helped to secure the burning to death of forty-one human beings, and if inquisitors tended not to call on the violence they had at their disposal, it was in significant part because they had available to them other effective methods of coercion. No amount of moderation detracts from the reality of the basic choice on offer to those accused: affirm the Catholic faith or die. Yet, for all that, the medieval Inquisitions cannot be said to have gone far beyond the practices of other courts of their day, or, for that matter, since.

After 1252, the Church had a dedicated force for the eradication of heresy, arrayed with formidable powers and answerable only to the pope. Yet, it is worth again getting a sense of chronological perspective. Between the first re-emergences of heresy as a clerical concern and the ultimate empowering of the inquisitors with torture, a period of time had elapsed roughly equivalent to that between the American War of Independence and today. If we take the mission of Alberic of Ostia as the beginning of the Church’s proactive pursuit of heresy, then the full empowering of the Inquisitions took place after a period slightly longer than that separating us from the beginning of the First World War. The development of the Inquisitions, anti-religionists believe, represented nothing more than the naturally explosive response of monotheism in

power to the diversity by which it felt threatened. If so, that explosion took place in curious slow motion. Far more convincing is that the gradualness of the emergence of the machinery of repression is consistent with its being part of the long-term evolution of political and ecclesiastical centralisation.

### THE NEW ELITE AND THE WAR OVER ORTHODOXY

If heresy-hunting emerged out of the new power rationales of the bureaucratic state, it was, then, the creation of the bureaucrat. The logic and practice of persecution crystallised through the work of a new elite, not simply as a means by which they extended the authority of their masters, but as part of the process by which they reshaped that authority in their own image. It expressed the ideology of their own particular form of power, and it expressed their particular fears. The deviant against whom the power of the new state was honed was *their* deviant.

From kingship to the papal 'monarchy' to municipal government, the exercise of centralising authority placed a new reliance on the written word and so on those who could employ it. The process began as an aspect of Church reform, with the question of what ought to qualify one for clerical office if the ability to buy it ought not to. The reformers demanded that literacy should invest the clergy, not only with the doctrine they were to teach, but also with the tools to pursue the Church's interests in the secular world. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as the historian of medieval reason, Alexander Murray, characterises it, the doors of the schools of theology and law were 'flung' open. The mechanics by which the Church was a vehicle for social ambition were thus rearranged, from having the money to pay for office to having the education to attain it. New routes to power were opened for those whose lower status would previously have disqualified them. The clerks provided the papacy with the bureaucratic technicians to make its primacy in canon law a basis of real authority, but they were much too valuable to be monopolised. In the royal and ducal courts, learned officials began to supplant the warrior aristocracy, gaining wealth and power as the holders of the technical expertise to realise secular rulers' own ambitions.

Not born to rule, the clerks looked to their education as the source of their dignity and authority. They valued reason, systematisation and centralisation over (as they saw it) superstition, redundant custom and local

particularism. They understood the power of the writ and the charter, of information and systematic record, of money; and they understood the authority vested in those who controlled them. But they also sensed that this was proper. It shaped their self-consciousness and their loyalties, and the 'intellectual interest' became, in Murray's words, 'a body-politic of its own, pushing its way up...through *societas Christiana*.'<sup>86</sup>

Traditional forms of community authority were increasingly regarded as unseemly. Moore gives the illustration of the attack on trial by ordeal. Here guilt might be tested by the accused carrying a red-hot iron bar for three paces, or by plunging their hand into boiling water to retrieve a stone. They were not expected to endure these trials unscathed; instead after three days their wounds would be examined to see if they had festered, an indication of God's displeasure at the guilty. Beneath the veneer of miraculous incontrovertibility lay a form of community justice. The days before the hands were unbandaged allowed the community to thresh out its view of the affair, and the decision as to the state of the injuries was highly subjective, being influenced by collective sympathy or otherwise with the defendant. In denouncing the ordeal, jurists spoke the language of superstition versus rational process, but, Moore argues, what concerned them equally was the impropriety of such community power and the impossibility of its control.<sup>87</sup> Lateran IV effectively abolished the ordeal when it forbade priests to perform the necessary blessings that always preceded it.<sup>88</sup>

The authority of the community was most directly challenged by the coming of the inquisitors. Throughout the twelfth century, those accused of heresy had been subject to traditional forms of community justice such as the ordeal, again implying that guilt was open to public judgement, and that local reputation might be the final arbiter. Contemporary accounts of such trials often betray tensions between clerical authorities and the community as to the weight to be given to the judgement of the ordeal.<sup>89</sup> One of the prime functions of the inquisitor was to be an outsider oblivious to local sentiment. Indeed, their techniques aimed to turn the community inside out, dissecting it so that the social arteries for the circulation of heresy might be identified. Upon arrival, an inquisitor would declare a period of grace for the lenient hearing of confessions and the gathering of suspicions. The subsequent investigation would seek to ascertain not only what suspect individuals believed, but also their networks of relationships and the beliefs of those within them. Through the collation of testimonies, inquisitors built up

a picture of the social functioning of the community from which they alone would make a determination as to extent of heretical infection. They would examine suspects and make their judgements *in camera*, and the community were to be observers only of the ceremonies of penance or expulsion in which the guilty began their journeys either back into the Christian community or to the stake.

The fear of heresy itself was the fear of the apostolic preacher's ability to mobilise community power. Murray found the writings of the clerks shot through with a deep animosity towards the *rusticus* and the *vulgus*, the brutish peasant and the capricious rabble.<sup>90</sup> The opposition explained the *literati*'s elevation and rationalised their privilege, but it also expressed the fear of the underling that is the corollary of all self-legitimising claims to social dominance.<sup>91</sup>

As we have seen, the Tanchelms and Henry of Lausannes, the Robert of Arbrissels and Arialds, all derived their authority from their appeal to those at whose expense the political and social transformations of the period had occurred. Popular acclamation was both the opportunity and the danger that such figures represented. When suitable, the Church had turned it against 'worldliness' in its own hierarchy, but in doing so it had harnessed, not created, the success of popular activists. Of itself the ability of a preacher to attract his audience and inspire them to often fanatical allegiance represented an 'unlicensed, uncontrolled power' vested in the appeal to 'somebody else's poor.' What ultimately separated Robert of Arbrissel from Henry of Lausanne, or St Francis of Assisi from Valdès, was the willingness to recognise the authority of the Church and so, in the end, the legitimacy of the social order. The logic of centralisation was, Moore argues, stark and ruthless: either the Church—increasingly the Church of the *literati*—determined who could preach and who was a heretic, or that power remained with the community and continued to express its interests. Like so many others, once the Church's revolution of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was established, it turned to reversing the momentum upon which it had once relied and to 'forcing back in the bottle the genie of popular power.'<sup>92</sup>

We have seen that the stereotype of the heretic gradually developed out of the schoolmen's practice of rationalising all heterodox beliefs within an artificial typology inherited from the Church Fathers.<sup>93</sup> The entrenching of the stereotype was accelerated by the Inquisitions.<sup>94</sup> Each tribunal acted independently, but the friars travelled widely, exchanging ideas with their colleagues and consulting each other's notes. Numerous

inquisitorial manuals set out procedures and the forms that heresies might take, describing their tell-tale signs and even the characteristic lies and evasions to be expected from suspects belonging to particular groups. Knowing already *what* heresy was, questions aimed only to tease out evidence of a certain variant, not to explore heterodox beliefs themselves. Inconvenient information could be dismissed as examples of a suspect's deviousness or reshaped until it fitted inquisitors' expectations. Ultimately the Inquisitions developed precise categorisations of behaviour as tools to map out of heretical activity, and these were the lens through which an inquisitor viewed the community in which he worked.

Heresy-hunting, then, was not simply religious absolutism unshackled, but an experiment in the power to order and classify. It *was* categorisation, organisation and definition, the reshaping of the religious world as an exercise in academic and bureaucratic praxis. Ultimately, Moore argues, persecution and heresy-hunting were not so much an excess of the development of the state as an inseparable part of that process.<sup>95</sup> We have learned to abhor persecution. But we fail to understand its historically symbiotic relationship with what now seems so obviously appropriate to our own societies that we regard it as mundane. Persecution, we believe, lies with the unreasoning, the deluded and the fanatical—with those of passion, not those governed by reason, system, logic and knowledge. Such is our sense of the grey bureaucrat that it becomes difficult to imagine him engaged in anything as interesting as persecution. Raving clerics seem much more plausible offenders. Yet if Moore is correct, persecution was central to honing the ordinary skills of ordering, categorising and classifying. The uncomfortable conclusion is that heresy-hunting was stimulated by, and in turn stimulated, the development of the art of government.<sup>96</sup>

Naturally, Moore's thesis has not been without critics and it is not my intention to suggest that it should be considered as *the* history of heresy in the Middle Ages. But if historians have not always accepted that he has charted the early formation of a persecuting society that characterised Europe thereafter, few would question the importance of the social transformations, or the political, bureaucratic and educational developments he identifies as central to the emergence of heresy-hunting. Few would question, in effect, that the presence of religion, even the empowerment of religion, was not enough to explain what happened.

In this picture of medieval heresy we do not find the auto-totalitarianism of the religious impulse claimed by Hitchens or Onfray. Nor do we find

Hitchens' sentimentalised picture of the commonsensical scepticism of the earthy peasant. We do not find Harris' insane literalists driven to a killing rage by nothing more than a too-ingenuous encounter with Deuteronomy. No more do we find the high Middle Ages to have simply been a continuation, in Grayling's terms, of the habitual suppression of freethought by a Church that had long since forgotten to do anything else. We might wish to apply Avelos' scarce resource theory to the contest over the right to define orthodoxy. But we would be obliged to consider that, whatever the reality of such a contest, it was intertwined with equally fundamental conflicts over political and social resources. Without doubt, heretic and inquisitor struggled over the scarce resources of doctrinal truth and the route to salvation. But in the same conflicts, local community and bureaucratic centre also fought over the scarce resource of authority, where it lay and in whose interests it operated. They fought over the scarce resource of the right to determine the boundaries of community and say who was Other. How do we determine which conflict over which scarce resource ought to be taken to characterise the period? Why privilege religion over politics? Why separate them at all?

Religion was not enough, biblical literalism was not enough; nor was the presence of fanaticism, nor the presence of heterodoxy. There was no sudden cataclysmic orgy of violence unleashed the instant that the Church came to the realisation that someone, somewhere, did not believe what it said. Despite the impression created by much anti-religionist mythology, medieval Europe did not languish from coast to coast under screams from the torture chamber and reek of burning flesh, albeit there were periods of terrible bloodshed. Religion was an integral part of the development of persecution, and the consequence was, in the end, to produce a much more tightly defined and exclusionary Catholicism. But if so, it was a central element in a much broader picture that becomes properly comprehensible only if its other components are included within the frame. If Moore is right, the Church became a proactive persecutor when it became part of, shaped, and was shaped by, a new general form of governance founded everywhere on the arrogation of power and the creation of machineries for social definition, exclusion and repression that emerged organically out of the worldview of a new breed of administrative functionary.<sup>97</sup>

The New Atheists ask us to look at the Church in medieval Europe and there view the sheer simplicity ('little to perplex us here'—Harris<sup>98</sup>) of the progress from faith to murder. Yet, when we actually do what is

asked of us and look, we find complexity and nuance, and religion too deeply embedded in culture, politics and, quite simply, in the fluid contingencies of human life, for such a deterministic picture to be credible. The simplicity is revealed as hopelessly simplistic, and the history as no diagnostic of an overriding natural malevolence taken to still lie just behind the ‘perfumed smokescreen’ of modern religious moderation. If we use history as a guide, we will have to learn to expect that the reasons behind the emergence of modern religious fundamentalism and violence will be no less complex and context-specific.

## NOTES

1. *GiNG*, 16.
2. *Ibid.*, 67.
3. *Ibid.*, 115.
4. *Ibid.*, 17.
5. *Ibid.*, 231–234, quote at 232.
6. *IDoA*, 140–150.
7. *TEoF*, see 18, 82.
8. *Ibid.*, 81–85 (*TPA*, 455–458).
9. *WiG*, 81.
10. *TtL*, 23–25.
11. *WiG*, 234–235.
12. *TtL*, 23.
13. *Ibid.*, 24.
14. *FW*, 103–110, 116–205, 244–273.
15. *Ibid.*, 186–188.
16. *Ibid.*, 201–203.
17. *TGV*, 36–43. For a similar argument based more specifically around Dawkins’ concept of ‘memes’ see Craig A. James, *The Religion Virus: Why We Believe in God* (Craig A. James, n.d.), 24–27, 70–73.
18. *FW*, 18, 103–104.
19. *TEoF*, 83 (*TPA*, 456–457).
20. *TEoF*, 83.
21. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 2.
22. *Ibid.*, 13, my emphasis; Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Reform Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 3rd ed., 2002, 1st ed. 1977), 17.
23. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 13.
24. *Ibid.*, 67.
25. *GiNG*, 6.

26. R. I. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent* (Oxford: Blackwell 1985, 1st ed. 1977), 25–30; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 15–21; Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans (eds.), *Heresies of the High Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 74–81.
27. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 9–18; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 28–30; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 82–85.
28. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 31–35; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 21–25; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 86–89.
29. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 63–66; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 57–59; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 96–101.
30. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 83–86; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 52–54; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 107–115.
31. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 102–107; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 54–55; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 118–121.
32. Quoted in Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 11; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 84.
33. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 58.
34. *Ibid.*, 55; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 120–121.
35. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 103.
36. R. I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970–1215* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 101–102.
37. Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 47–52.
38. Colin Morris, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 100–101.
39. Moore, *The First European Revolution*, 15.
40. Quoted in Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 55.
41. Morris, *The Papal Monarchy*, 155, 164.
42. *Ibid.*, 100, 436–438; Lambert, *Medieval Heresy*, 44–46.
43. Moore, *The First European Revolution*, 16–17.
44. Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c. 1170–1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7–13.
45. Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 58–60; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 221–222.
46. Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent*, 17–18.
47. The history of the Waldensians must be balanced against that of the Mendicant orders that emerged in the early thirteenth century. Whilst



- closely resembling the wandering preachers and carrying the potentially dangerous apostolic message, the Franciscans and Dominicans voiced only obedience to the Church and so were given formal status within the faith. C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 3rd ed., 2001, 1st ed. 1984), 238–275; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 270–271.
48. Deane, *A History of Heresy and Inquisition*, 17.
  49. Mark Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22–25.
  50. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee*, 4; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 17–18; alternatively see Moore, *The Origins of European Dissent*, 139–140, 145–146, 154–157.
  51. Barber, *The Cathars*, 1.
  52. Mark Pegg, ‘On Cathars, Albigenses, and Good Men of Languedoc’, *Journal of Medieval History* 27 (2001), 181–195.
  53. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 147–148, 168–170.
  54. Quoted in *Ibid.*, 205.
  55. Pegg, ‘On Cathars, Albigenses, and Good Men of Languedoc’, 191; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 132–139.
  56. Pegg, *A Most Holy War*, 38–41.
  57. *Ibid.*, 42–44; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 188–191.
  58. Pegg, *A Most Holy War*, chapter 4.
  59. *Ibid.*, 33–34; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 261–263.
  60. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, *passim*.
  61. See for example, Claire Taylor, ‘Evidence for Dualism in Inquisitorial Registers of the 1240s: A Contribution to a Debate’, *History*, 98 (2013), 319–345; Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, chapters 1 and 3, which accepts that Cathar must be avoided, and that no pan-European dualist faith existed, but which finds dualism to have been a potent force that emerged indigenously in ‘pockets’ in southern France and northern Italy.
  62. *Ibid.*, 262.
  63. Peters, *Inquisition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 48; Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 205–206.
  64. R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe. Volume I: Foundations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 142–143.
  65. For an overview of governmental innovation on Sicily, England and France see Malcolm Barber, *The Two Cities: Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 233–234, 286–288, 323–325.
  66. Morris, *The Papal Monarchy*, 205–210; Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, 137–141.

67. Walter Ullmann, *A Short History of the Papacy in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen, 1977), 179–181; Morris, *The Papal Monarchy*, 211–212.
68. *Ibid.*, 217–219.
69. Peters, *Inquisition*, 46.
70. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 109–110; *id.*, *The First European Revolution*, 164.
71. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 111.
72. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 191–193; *id.*, *The First European Revolution*, 171–172.
73. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 26.
74. Quoted in F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), 185.
75. Letter to Philip Augustus, 28 May 1204, quoted in Morris, *The Papal Monarchy*, 443.
76. Moore, *The First European Revolution*, 174.
77. Deane, *A History of Heresy and Inquisition*, 91.
78. Quoted in *ibid.*, 90.
79. Peters, *Inquisition*, 55; Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 98–100; Bernard Hamilton, *The Medieval Inquisition* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 36–39.
80. *Ibid.*, 76–81.
81. Quoted in Edward Peters, *Torture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 65.
82. Harris, *The End of Faith*, 84.
83. Hamilton, *The Medieval Inquisition*, 41.
84. Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*, 113–114.
85. *Ibid.*, 111, 115.
86. Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 237.
87. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 126–132, 138; *id.*, *The First European Revolution*, 166–168.
88. Another example was the Church's monopolisation of the declaration of sainthood, which had previously often been based in popular acclamation. *Ibid.*, 23–29, 53–55, 168.
89. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 93, 99, 166, 173–175; *id.*, *The First European Revolution*, 168–169; Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 249.
90. Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, 237–244.
91. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 140.
92. *Ibid.*, 102–104; *id.*, *The First European Revolution*, 168–170.
93. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 312, 314–315.

94. On the links between the mendicants and the schools see Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 261–264.
95. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*, 110, 112.
96. *Ibid.*, 140.
97. Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 330–331.
98. *TEoF*, 86.



## Chalking Up Six Million Deaths to Religion: Appropriating the Holocaust

The polemical value of the Inquisitions and the witch-hunt lies in the convictions recalled, but crimes not immediately associated with religion must be also included in the New Atheist litany of its transgressions. Colonialism, the North American and Amerindian ‘ethnocides’, the slave trade, Stalinism, North Korean totalitarianism, South African apartheid and even the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are among the atrocities lengthening the charge-sheet.<sup>1</sup> But one crime stands out:

...Hitler asked Bishop Berning of Osnabrück, had the Church not looked at Jews as parasites and shut them up in ghettos? ‘I am only doing what the church has done for fifteen hundred years, only more effectively.’

So chalk up at least six million twentieth-century deaths to religion.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the physicist, Victor Stenger, blithely declares the Holocaust to have been a crime of faith.

The claim is standard among the New Atheists, who themselves represent only the most high-profile enthusiasts for an argument pursued widely on the internet.<sup>3</sup> Hector Avalos dedicates a chapter of *Fighting Words*, another in *The Christian Delusion* and two *Debunking Christianity* web articles to showing that ‘Nazism is simply an updated form of Christian anti-Judaism.’ Richard Carrier *knows* that Hitler was ‘unmistakably a God-fearing Christian.’ The Nazi Party, he notes, identified ‘positive Christianity’ as a founding principle, and the 1933 agreement with the Vatican to protect Catholic religious education allows for

‘no doubt that the Nazis were thoroughly and devotedly Christian, eager to inculcate Christian theism for future generations.’<sup>4</sup> Michel Onfray is equally certain. Hitler, he tells us, adhered to the ‘true Christianity’ displayed by the violent, anti-Semitic saviour of the Johanine scriptures, ‘[s]o the gas chambers could be operated in the name of Saint John.’<sup>5</sup> Richard Dawkins is more cautious as to the sincerity of Hitler’s Christianity, but he too insists that the Führer could only have inherited his fanatical racism from the traditional stigmatisation of the Jews as deicides.<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hitchens, in his turn, describes Nazism as ‘quasi-pagan’ but its anti-Semitism as the worst outbreak of ‘a virus [that] was kept alive for centuries by religion.’<sup>7</sup> For Sam Harris, whether or not the Nazis thought of themselves as Christian is conveniently irrelevant. ‘The anti-Semitism that built the crematoria brick by brick’, he declares, ‘comes to us by way of Christian theology. Knowingly or not, the Nazis were agents of religion.’<sup>8</sup> Gregory Paul takes the final, almost too predictable step to complete the polemical circle: ‘The Holocaust was as much an act of faith as the attacks of 9/11.’<sup>9</sup>

Each is rejecting a prominent theist argument that atheists were responsible for the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century, apparently because totalitarianism is the natural shape of societies that abandon religion’s humanitarian inspiration and moral yoke. They are right to do so, since these accusations are themselves historically illiterate, based on the crude assumption that a crime committed by an atheist and a crime of atheism are the same thing.<sup>10</sup> Such claims are easily refuted by exposing the simplistic and prejudiced assumptions that lie behind them, or, in the case of Nazism, by pointing to the sheer lack of evidence for atheism as a driving force within the movement.

Yet simply dodging the totalitarian bullet appears not to satisfy. Instead, it must be ricocheted back at those who fired it. This is not especially surprising. The New Atheism seems almost preconditioned to assume religious guilt in any case of inhumanity it encounters. That the Holocaust would be Christian *feels right*. But more fundamentally, it is difficult to argue for religion as the prime motivator of human ‘evil’ unless it can be shown to have driven what is commonly regarded as the greatest crime in history. Even were religion’s defenders to ignore it, the Final Solution could not be an indifferent matter. Its unique hold on the popular consciousness will always tempt the polemically greedy, but for the New Atheism the Holocaust simply cannot lie outside the sphere of its didactic condemnations.

An evidential free-for-all ensues. The Wehrmacht carried the slogan ‘*Gott mit uns*’ on their belt buckles; Luftwaffe aircraft displayed more crosses than swastikas; in 1543, Martin Luther published an anti-Semitic programme similar to that the Nazis would enact four hundred years later; *Kristallnacht* took place over Luther’s birthday; the fifteenth-century Spanish Catholic *limpieza de sangre* and Hitler’s *reinhaltung des blutes* both translate as an anti-Semitic demand for ‘purity of blood’; *Mein Kampf* never found a place on the Vatican’s index of prohibited books.<sup>11</sup> In their different ways, each claim is offered as if it were somehow conclusive, its particular ‘proof’ irrefutable and resolving the issue at a stroke. Too ready to find the Nazi smoking gun in the hands of their opponents, New Atheists inflate the importance of their examples in a tit-for-tat of blame as crude as the accusations they refute. On both sides, remarkably basic questions are not asked of the evidence.

### WHOSE HITLER? THE ACID TEST OF ETHICAL CLAIMS IN THE GOD DEBATE

One type of evidence, however, predominates. Both sides share the sense that Hitler’s personal faith, or lack of it, must be of the utmost significance—that, as ‘probably one of the most evil men to have ever walked the earth’ (Paul Tobin), he indeed offers a quick and powerful acid test of the ethical claims of whichever side he is found to have been on. For the New Atheists, then, the must-be-religious Holocaust can be inferred from the must-be-religious Hitler, and so, by demonstrating the personal religiosity of the Führer, the shame of the ‘greatest crime in history’ can find its proper home.

Yet evidence from Hitler’s life is surprising sparse given that he must have a strong claim to be the most studied individual in history. Whatever Hitler was, he was not a practicing Christian in the ordinary sense. The handful of clues suggestive of some Church affiliation find their way again and again into anti-religionist polemics and are made too much of. Hitler was baptised and raised as a Catholic. As a young choir boy he was ‘intoxicated’ with Church festivals, and he briefly (at elementary school!) aspired to be an abbot. The adult Hitler never formally renounced his membership of the faith and continued to pay his annual dues to the German Catholic Church. A few of those closest were, on occasion, unequivocal in describing him as a ‘good Catholic.’<sup>12</sup> It is

difficult to overstate the weakness of this as evidence for more than the most nominal Christianity, if even that. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that anti-religionists would give the same level of authority to such a paucity of evidence with regard to any other individual.

But what Hitler certainly did do was talk. Religion escaped neither his podium performances nor his habit of pontificating in conversation, and yet a contradictory picture has emerged. His speeches sometimes made overt claims to Christian inspiration, and could be infused with providentialism and quasi-religious sentiment, but in private he was apparently scathing towards the Church, and sometimes towards Christianity itself. Much of the polemical debate over Hitler's religion has thus become a competition of quotes.

Lists of those expressing religiosity and Christian sentiment have been assiduously assembled on anti-religionist websites as resources to meet the theist calumny.<sup>13</sup> But such a deployment makes contextualisation impossible and creates the impression of certainty where none exists. To take only one of the best-known examples, from a speech given in Munich on 12 April 1922:

My feelings as a Christian points me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter. In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders.<sup>14</sup>

The quote always rendered this way, but it is a misleading edit.<sup>15</sup> It should read:

I would like to appeal here to a greater than I, Count Lerchenfeld. He said in the last session of the Landtag that his feeling 'as a man and Christian' prevented him from being an Anti-Semite. I say: my feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter...<sup>16</sup>

Reunited with its opening sentences, it becomes clear that Hitler is not offering an unprompted declaration of faith so much as attempting to overturn an explicitly Christian criticism of anti-Semitism. In the (always unquoted) end of the passage he declares that witnessing the

‘wretchedness and misery’ of his fellow Germans, *his* Christian charity demands he fight their exploiters ‘as did our Lord two thousand years ago.’<sup>17</sup> This raises a plethora of issues. Hitler cannot automatically be presumed to be lying, but the clear responsive-propagandist nature of the speech makes it impossible to assume unquestioningly his sincerity either. But surely, the fact of the appeal to Christians, and the use of images of a violent anti-Jewish saviour to do so, is itself significant? Then again, do we discern in that very appeal an implicit recognition that Christian and Nazi principles were widely understood to be in opposition? Is this an attempt to emasculate a powerful threat through the pretense of brotherhood? Under only these most basic questions, the appearance of the ‘knock-out’ quote recedes speedily into the distance.

Theists, on the whole, have been much less industrious in this area than their opponents, tending to rely on the anti-religious Führer revealed in the private conversations recorded in *Hitler’s Table Talk*. Here Hitler ‘would never come to terms with the Christian lie.’ It was a religion of ‘cruelty, ignominy and falsehood’, and he took satisfaction in predicting its demise. The apparent contradiction between his public and private statements has given credibility to the sense that Hitler was a duplicitous opportunist, courting a Christian population that he held in contempt. In *What’s So Great About Christianity?*, Dinesh D’Souza appeals to the *Table Talk* to show that the strategy has hoodwinked today’s militant atheists as much as it did German Christians in Weimar and the Third Reich.<sup>18</sup>

Richard Carrier, however, raised concerns in 2002 as to the reliability of the *Table Talk*, concerns that D’Souza and other theists have ignored.<sup>19</sup> The most commonly used version is Hugh Trevor-Roper’s from 1953. Whilst this claims to be a direct translation of the German, Carrier shows that it is actually a retranslation of a 1952 French edition by the ‘Swiss banker and lifetime Nazi’, François Genoud.<sup>20</sup> Both contain precisely the same deviations from the original. So, for example, a sentence apparently predicting ‘the end of the disease of Christianity’, turns out in the German to make no mention of Christianity at all but instead to refer to Social Darwinism.<sup>21</sup> Carrier found numerous such discrepancies that altered the meaning of Hitler’s statements so ‘radically’ that he believes they evidence a ‘shameful mischief’, and that generations of scholars have accepted the Führer’s anti-Christianity on the basis of a forgery.



Carrier's questions are serious and they should lead to much greater circumspection as to whether the 'real' anti-Christian Hitler revealed himself to his confidants. But some atheists seem to believe that they can now take Hitler's religious statements at face value untroubled by the inconvenience of the *Table Talk*. Indeed, Hector Avelos attempts to browbeat D'Souza with Carrier's article, as if the *Table Talk* has now been captured for the anti-religionist armoury.<sup>22</sup> Carrier's work merits no such conclusion. He analyses only four entries out of (by my count) forty-two that discuss religion, and so the great majority of Hitler's apparent anti-Christian comments remain uninvestigated. Carrier is quite open about this, reasonably framing his article as a call for further examination of the *Table Talk*.

Within this framework, however, both his sense of proportion and his objectivity slip. He repeatedly describes the Trevor-Roper edition as 'worthless', a claim hardly to be made from such a limited analysis, however suggestive its findings. On the basis of Genoud's apparent attempt to pass off a forged Hitler 'Last Testament' to the Holocaust-denier, David Irving, Carrier also feels justified in peppering his analysis with conspiratorial language. Genoud was not incompetent but 'mischievous', he has not misunderstood and mistranslated Hitler but 'doctored' and 'falsified' his words, those involved in the English edition were 'dupes' or even 'accomplices', and the whole enterprise adds up to a 'crime.' The impression created is of a scandalous and systematic attempt to suppress Hitler's religiosity in particular. This no doubt plays well with an anti-religionist audience eager for polemical capital (it may even turn out to be true), but it simply cannot be justified on the basis of what Carrier is able to present. He cannot demonstrate the extent of the 'mischief' he identifies, cannot show that Genoud was peculiarly concerned with religion or how systematic his 'doctoring' was, nor can he explain it, since, as he admits, he knows little about him as has not endeavoured to find out.

### HITLER'S BIBLE AND THE BIBLE'S HITLER

According to some in the debate, the truth about Hitler has long been hiding in plain sight, declaring itself from the pages of *Mein Kampf* had anyone but thought to pay attention. 'The book exists', Michel Onfray complains, 'but who reads this text that everyone talks about but no one has ever opened?'<sup>23</sup> 'If we wish to know motives', Avelos contends, 'a reasonable procedure is to seek the reasons people give for what they

do', and so *Mein Kampf* must be our foremost authority on Hitler's faith.<sup>24</sup> Both argue that the book shows the direct influence of scripture on the ideology of National Socialism. Hitler, they believe, did not simply find there a powerful language to express his hatred, rather he learned who and how to hate through the Bible itself.

No doubt there is something deeply satisfying in the idea of establishing such an influence. Here Christian claims that the Bible is ethically perfect and an inspiration to human goodness might be deftly overturned if it could be shown to have moulded a figure of such all-consuming hate—if it could be shown, that is, that Hitler's understanding of the Bible's own racism was essentially correct. So both Onfray and Avalos set out to draw a Hitlerian exegesis from *Mein Kampf*, one they insist was legitimate. But, in doing so, both take extreme liberties with the text and adopt the most elastic standards of historical plausibility.

For Onfray, Hitler's genocidal racism was the logical outgrowth of accepting the 'dual message' of the Bible. Jesus advocated turning the other cheek, but also condemned unbelievers to hell, so,

if we abrogate this Gospel parable and replace it with the vengeful Old Testament prescription [of an eye for an eye], and couple this with the New Testament episode of the Temple moneylenders, the worst of excesses can easily be justified.

*Kristallnacht* could be defended as a modern-day eviction of the moneylenders, and the Final Solution as a proportionate application of the *lex talionis* against the Jewish assault on civilisation.<sup>25</sup> Such an argument requires clear evidence, first of the absolute centrality of Biblicism to the Hitler's genocidal anti-Semitism, and second that he read the scriptures in the contrived way Onfray suggests.

To make his case, Onfray offers an array of quotes and paraphrases from various sections of *Mein Kampf*. Here Hitler indeed referred approvingly to Jesus' attack on the moneylenders, and this he admired as 'true Christianity': an 'apodictic faith' that violently defended the absolutism of its claims. 'Passionate intolerance' for pagan altars had allowed Christianity to establish its dominance, which it maintained through a stubborn refusal to capitulate, even to the discoveries of science. 'In all this', Onfray notes, 'Hitler asks his readers to "take lessons from the Catholic Church".' John 2:15 and the various New Testament promises to consign the Jews to hell, made clear the remaining objects

of Christianity's passionate intolerance: the race of deicides and abusers of religion. Here was the source of the anti-humanity of the Jews, and, Onfray concludes, for Hitler 'things were clear: "to the political leader, the religious ideas and institutions of his people must remain inviolable." So the gas chambers could be operated in the name of Saint John.'<sup>26</sup>

But Onfray's jumble of references meets neither evidential criterion. No doubt a preference for the violent Christ is implied in Hitler's regard for John 2:15.<sup>27</sup> But Onfray fails to show (rather than only claim) the weight this carried in his thinking. No trace of the highly specific abrogation and substitution of scriptural exemplars is apparent in the sections of *Mein Kampf* referred to. Conspicuously absent is any mention of the *lex talionis* in connection with Jesus' scourging of the Temple money-lenders, nor is it even implied. As to the quotations themselves, none are quite as Onfray represents them, and some are entirely misrepresented.

Two examples will suffice to show the problems of Onfray's approach. Take first the crucial reference to John 2:15. Whatever its place in his thinking more generally, Hitler does not *in the passage cited* offer the image of the scourging Christ as the foremost, or even as an especially important inspiration for the aggression of his anti-Semitism. Instead, he inserts the reference only as a supporting example to a specific argument as to the racial status of the Jews. They, he declares, smooth their infiltration of the races they seek to enslave through a 'first great lie', which is to present themselves as belonging only to a separate religion and not a separate race. The host people are deceived into thinking that the Jew in their midst is 'a Frenchman or an Englishman, a German or an Italian, though of a special religious faith', and so they are blind to the racial threat. Yet the Jews are incapable of genuine religious sentiment and so their faith is 'embezzled' to cover the repellent materialism that characterises them as a race.<sup>28</sup> John 2:15 is appealed to by way of illustration, for Jesus recognised the inalienable worldliness of the Jews even under the façade of religion:

...[he] made no secret of his attitude toward the Jewish people, and when necessary he even took to the whip to drive from the temple of the Lord this adversary of all humanity, who then as always saw in religion nothing but an instrument for his business existence.<sup>29</sup>

Here, then, the exemplar offered is not so much the violence of Christ's action, but rather that he exposed the fundamental Jewish lie. He is to

be positively contrasted with those who have ‘not the faintest idea that the Jews are members of a *people* and not of a “*religion*”.’ Much, of course, is implied here; such as that Christ shared Hitler’s racial interpretation of Judaism,<sup>30</sup> and that the violence of the exposure was justified. The passage can—perhaps must—be read in the context of a tendency among many Nazis to identify Christ as the archetypal anti-Semite.<sup>31</sup> But to read it as a Christian-coded call to genocide is to superimpose the hindsight of what was to come. Hitler does here envisage a solution to the Jewish fraud, but it is not some premonition of a Johannine *Kristallnacht*. He advocates instead a protective education in the tactics of Jewish subversion, to be achieved through popular awareness of the content of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the (forged) ‘secret plan’ which elaborated point by point the strategy for world domination by stealth. ‘For once this book has become the common property of a people’, Hitler promises, ‘the Jewish menace may be considered as broken.’<sup>32</sup> In a sense, it is indeed an emulation of Christ’s action—his disempowering exposure of the subterfuge, not his taking up of the whip.

What of Catholicism’s ‘apodictic’ faith and ‘passionate intolerance’ as the inspiration for Hitler’s totalitarian absolutism? This discussion occurs in a later chapter of *Mein Kampf* in which he expresses contempt for those idealists who believe that the creation of the *völkisch* state can be attained merely by constructive persuasion. ‘An existing condition’, he declares, must instead be actively destroyed by negative argument and no continuance ‘of a body representing the former condition’ can be tolerated thereafter. It is here that Christianity provides a supporting example. At its foundation it ‘could not content itself with building up its own altar; it was absolutely forced to undertake the destruction of the heathen altars’ to ensure the establishment of an absolute faith uncompromised by the possibility of alternatives.

What Onfray neglects to point out is that Hitler attributes the same qualities to both Marxism and Judaism. Before constructing its state, Marxism

practiced criticism for seventy years, annihilating, disintegrating criticism, and again criticism, which persisted until the old state was undermined and brought to collapse. Only then did its actual ‘construction’ begin. And that was self-evident, correct and logical.<sup>33</sup>

What is true of political philosophy is ‘equally true’ of religion, and so Christianity is his second example after Bolshevism. But then Hitler reveals the true origin of what he is advocating:

...this type of intolerance and fanaticism positively embodies the Jewish nature. This may be a thousand times true; we may deeply regret this fact and establish with justifiable loathing that its appearance in the history of mankind is something that was previously alien to history – yet that does not alter the fact that this condition *is* with us today.<sup>34</sup>

The modern world, Hitler is declaring, is beset by great intolerances that were conceived first by the Jews and later adopted by Christianity and Bolshevism. Thus, whilst Hitler sees absolutist intolerance as a ‘pre-supposition’ of Christianity, he does not claim it as uniquely, or originally religious, or that it is a lesson he has learned only from religion. Indeed, if fanatical intolerance began with the Jews, that, by Hitler’s definition, would place its origins outside religion and within a culture he saw as essentially atheist (however amenable it would later prove to Christianity). The ‘lessons’ to be learned are only strategic: German nationalism must meet intolerance with intolerance. ‘A philosophy filled with infernal intolerance’, he asserts, ‘will only be broken by a new idea driven forward by the same spirit, championed by the same mighty will...’ Whatever admiration is expressed—and Onfray’s image of Hitler ‘marvelling’ at the Church seems to overstate the case—no endorsement of Christianity is offered here, in fact, quite the opposite:

The individual may establish with pain today that with the appearance of Christianity the first spiritual terror entered into the far freer ancient world, but he will not be able to contest the fact that since then the world has been afflicted and dominated by this coercion, and that coercion is broken only by coercion, and terror by terror. Only then can a new state of affairs be constructively created.<sup>35</sup>

Hector Avelos is concerned to exonerate Darwinism from any culpability for the Final Solution, and so focuses attention on the Old Testament to find the ‘rationale’ for Hitler’s eugenic anti-Semitism. He quotes Hitler’s views on the crime of race mixing:

...it is one of those concerning which it has been said with such terrible justice that the sins of the fathers are avenged *down to the tenth generation*...Blood sin and desecration of the race are the original sin in the world...<sup>36</sup>

Hitler's source is Deuteronomy 23:2–3, which Avelos quotes:

No bastard shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the lord. No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD for ever.

Avelos continues: 'Hitler adds that "To bring about such a development is, then, nothing else but to sin against the will of the eternal creator."' Finally, if Deuteronomy legislates the punishment for race mixing, the rationale for its being a sin is given in Ezra 9:1–2 and 12, in which the Israelites are exhorted not to provoke racial degeneration by marrying out.<sup>37</sup> Avelos concludes that the proto-eugenics of the Old Testament are clear, and '*Mein Kampf*' indicates that it is the Bible, not *On the Origin of Species*, that seems to be the more direct influence for Hitler.'<sup>38</sup>

That Hitler is alluding to Deuteronomy seems established, but what this is evidence *of* is far from clear. The quote is taken from his discussion of the physical and mental degeneration that he believes results from intermarriage. The will to redress this calamity is, he declares, a 'touchstone of a race's value.'<sup>39</sup> Ruthless measures must be undertaken and 'if necessary, the incurably sick will be pitilessly segregated – a barbaric measure for the unfortunate who is struck by it, but a blessing for his fellow men and posterity.'<sup>40</sup> It is in this context that Hitler writes:

...the race which cannot stand the test will simply die out, making place for the healthier or tougher and more resisting races. For since this question primarily regards the offspring, it is one of those concerning which it is said with such terrible justice that the sins of the father are avenged down to the tenth generation. But this applies only to profanation of the blood and the race.

The emphasis on eugenic sin is clear, but important points need to be made.

There is little reason to see Christian thinking as pre-eminent in Hitler's discussion. The quote from Deuteronomy is oblique at best. It may reflect a genuine engagement with the text or it may equally be a generalised allusion to an anti-Semitic commonplace of the sort that Hitler absorbed in Linz and Vienna. From *Mein Kampf* itself we cannot say with certainty that he had read Deuteronomy, or that he even knew of the origin of his own quote. The claim directly following, that race mixing is 'the original sin', might appear to confirm an attention to scripture in these passages (Avelos seems to use it to do so). But this may also be simply an appropriation of biblical language since Hitler's claim has nothing to do with orthodox Christian theology. The section itself (some sixteen pages) devotes far more space to the discussion of German history, to 'hygienic' education and propaganda, to the dangers of Bolshevism and to the eradication of prostitution. Here, for instance, Hitler complains that the 'Jewification of our spiritual life and mammonization of our mating instinct' have produced an affront to 'Nature' which she is avenging.<sup>41</sup> This could be an allusion to Social Darwinism or merely a rhetorical cliché, but it carries the same weight in the section as the Deuteronomy reference. Why assume the greater importance of the latter?

Hitler's reference to an 'eternal creator', which Avelos implies comes from the same passage as the Deuteronomy quote ('Hitler *adds...*') in fact comes from an entirely different section of *Mein Kampf*, and is the conclusion to a more detailed attack on racial mixing which, far from being overtly Christian, is strongly Social Darwinist in its flavour. 'In the struggle for daily bread', Hitler claims,

all those who are weak and sickly or less determined succumb, while the struggle of the males for the female grants the right or opportunity to propagate only to the healthiest. And struggle is always a means for improving a species' health and power of resistance and, therefore, a cause of its higher development.

On all this 'Nature looks on calmly, with satisfaction, in fact.' But in the mixing of unequal races 'her whole work of higher breeding, over perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, might be ruined with one blow.' The offspring is an unnatural hybrid that stands 'higher than the racially lower parent, but not as high as the higher one', and so the physical and intellectual regression of the higher race is inevitable. It is then Hitler

declares that ‘To bring about such a development is, then, nothing else but to sin against the will of the eternal creator.’<sup>42</sup> In order to demonstrate that Christianity, and not Darwinism, was the greater influence on Hitler’s racism, Avelos has removed an indeterminate, although undoubtedly suggestive, reference to a creator from its Social Darwinist context, and artificially juxtaposed it with an oblique biblical quote to suggest that they are mutually supportive and that the primacy of Christianity in Hitler’s eugenic obsessions was certain.

Even if we assume that Hitler’s reference to Deuteronomy was more than simply a general allusion, Avelos’ case is questionable. He attempts to show us, not only that Hitler claimed a scriptural precedent for his racism, but that the claim was legitimate. Theists must accept Christianity’s responsibility for the Holocaust because Hitler was essentially correct in his understanding of Old Testament racism. But in reality Avelos, like Onfray, has not so much traced a Hitlerian exegesis as constructed one.

He notes that Hitler is referring to both verses two and three of Deuteronomy 23. It is not apparent that this is necessarily the case, and yet, without verse three, Hitler’s racial interpretation of the law becomes only one of several that are possible. Deuteronomy 23:2 excludes ‘bastards’, a general term probably encompassing the offspring of any prohibited union. This may have included a racial element, but it also stigmatised morally undesirable offspring such the children of incest and possibly those of prostitutes. Were this alone to be the source of Hitler’s quote then his exclusively racial perspective would point only to the selectivity of his interpretation. Yet extending the quotation to take in verse three—with its prohibition specifically on the Ammonites and Moabites—allows for the racial focus to appear pre-eminent. It acts as an explication that seems to dissolve the generality of verse two’s prohibition, apparently validating Hitler’s reading. But this is misleading, for Deuteronomy 23:3 does not actually refer to race mixing. The sentence—in contrast to how Avelos twice punctuates his quote—runs on into verse four and reads:

**3** No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the LORD for ever; **4** because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt, and because they



hired against you Balaam the son of Be'or from Pethor of Mesopota'mia,  
to curse you.

Clearly, those to be excluded are political and tribal enemies who have committed specific crimes against Israel, the punishment for which is to be extended to their descendants. No eugenic rationale is apparent. In order to provide it, Avelos has to introduce Ezra 9:1–2 and 12. Yet this is not referred to in these sections of *Mein Kampf*, and again we cannot know (from this source at least) that Hitler was even aware of the scripture. My point is not to criticise Avelos' biblical scholarship—there may be a wealth of extra-textual evidence to suggest that Deuteronomy 2–4 should not be read literally, and there may be very good reasons to believe that Ezra reveals a eugenic racism that should be considered implicit in the exclusions. But it is historically invalid to impose even the most sound exegesis on another source that simply shows no awareness of it. Hitler was a eugenic racist who, however obliquely, referred to biblical references for support. Deuteronomy and Ezra may reveal a eugenic precedent that theists have to acknowledge. But in showing us only what a Hitlerian exegesis *might* have been, Avelos is very far indeed from establishing a causal link between the two.

### TRUSTING HISTORIANS TO DO THEIR JOB

All of the supposed proofs of Nazi religiosity cited by anti-religionists suffer similar difficulties of contextualisation and analysis, and as a consequence, an important point needs to be stressed.

Historians of National Socialism have not been negligent. The fact that today we still do not *know* the extent or form of Nazi religiosity reflects the difficulties of studying a movement that was itself a cacophonous mix of differing and often competing interests, and that tolerated a very wide idiomatic variation in the personal expression of its ideology. The German national community could represent a return to a primordial racial paganism, a completion of the Christian reformation, a providential fulfilment of Social Darwinist law, or any combination of these and more. Nazism was also a mass movement in an age of bureaucracy and mass communication, with the huge expansion of historical source material that those things imply. With the wealth of information revealing the disparate thoughts and experiences of Party functionaries, fellow travellers, reluctant collaborators and victims, the essence of the

movement requires ever greater analytical diffusion to capture. Yet historians have asked the questions around which this part of the God debate revolves, and, even if no consensus has resulted, they have given answers.

New Atheists and anti-religionists take offence at the supposedly unwarranted historical orthodoxy of Hitler's irreligion. They implicitly condemn all of the historians of the Third Reich who have read *Mein Kampf* but simply cannot seem to grasp that Hitler meant what he wrote. But this indicates only how alienated the polemical exchange is from the work that ought to inform it. It need not be, since major studies on the issues involved are readily accessible. However, reading them should not be a particularly comfortable experience for either side.

It is well known that the New Atheism began to take shape in the wake of the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, as atheists in the United States and Europe found their suspicions as to the malevolent power of religion apparently confirmed beyond even their expectations. The ability of faith itself to drive political violence, they felt, needed open recognition and no longer to be hidden behind a smokescreen of supposedly more 'real' socio-economic and cultural grievances. In understanding 9/11 it was important to realise that it was not an aberration but a logical manifestation of the murderous hatred that comes from the absolute conviction in a saving truth that must be forced upon a sinful world. As the New Atheists sought to fill in the history of religious immorality of which 9/11 must be the latest episode, they readily perceived connections with the lethal fanaticism of totalitarianism and, as we have seen, rushed too eagerly to appropriate it for their cause.

September 11 and its aftermath have also been, in the words of the historian of Fascism, Roger Griffin, 'a turn of events that makes particular demands on contemporary historians and social scientists in the West, requiring them...to re-read some recent chapters in our own history more slowly.'<sup>43</sup> Prominent amongst these, he noted, would be a renewed focus upon right-wing extremism as a subject offering particular insights into the role of ideological fanaticism in fostering political violence. In these terms, the intellectual demands of 9/11 elided with an existing resurgence of interest in the concept of totalitarianism itself. This focus developed in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and quickly provoked debate around the importance of 'secular' religiosity in shaping the ideological make-up of the interwar movements and explaining their fanatical commitment to the violent creation of new orders. The establishment of a dedicated academic journal provided a forum for the

bringing together of work on totalitarian religiosity, ethno-religious violence and Islamic fundamentalism,<sup>44</sup> whilst the interest in the relationship between totalitarianism and religiosity filtered through to a more general audience in major new works of historical synthesis.<sup>45</sup> Separate from the 'political religion' debate was the publication of a highly controversial study in 2003 by Richard Steigmann-Gall, who, in *The Holy Reich*, argued that many in the Nazi leadership were believing Christians and had understood their movement to be Christian also. Over two decades, then, a significant trend within the study of totalitarianism has considered the extent to which its movements can be characterised as religious. But as both sides in the God debate focus instead on finding the Christian or the atheist Hitler, they have been all but oblivious to it.

### NAZISM AS A POLITICAL RELIGION

The idea that the authoritarian regimes of interwar Europe were types of political religions was first mooted by contemporary observers.<sup>46</sup> The term 'political religion' itself is often credited to the political philosopher, Eric Voegelin, who published a highly influential essay of that title in 1938, before fleeing Nazi Germany. Other prominent exponents included the exiled Catholic priest and opponent of Mussolini, Don Luigi Sturzo, the anti-Bolshevik and anti-Nazi Catholic journalist, Waldemar Gurian, the sociologist, Raymond Aron, and the theologian, Paul Tillich. Political religion analyses have a strong affinity with totalitarianism theory, and have followed a similar historiographical trajectory, informing a wide body of important research before losing prominence with the development of more functionalist interpretations which stressed the importance of social and political structures over ideology in determining the nature of the great dictatorships. But from the early 1990s both totalitarianism and political religion have appeared once again to provide useful heuristics.

Nazism, by these analyses, was 'a quasi-religious cult which...played and experimented with religious forms.'<sup>47</sup> Commonly cited are the Nuremberg rallies, widely familiar through Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Triumph of the Will* (1934). By the final rally in 1938, almost one million party members were attending the week-long congress, in which each day was given over to the ritualistic celebration of a specific part of the Nazi national community. A complex of monumental buildings was constructed to both physically embody the *Völk* and provoke the

experience of it. Thus, within the ramparts of the Zeppelin Field two hundred thousand could stand in solidarity, but the only possible focal point was the tribune on its grandstand: 'it united anyone from any place in the Zeppelin Field in a focus on the man standing on it: Hitler.'<sup>48</sup> It was Nazi *architecture parlante*, the building's sole purpose to express the mystical bond between the Führer and his people. The most elaborate ritualism was found in the 'cathedral of light' and in the reverence of the movement's most holy relic, the Blood Flag. On the fifth evening, Hitler arrived on the rostrum at the Zeppelin Field as one hundred and fifty searchlights created a wall of light around the stadium, a symbolic shield against 'the dark Walpurgis in which hovered Bolsheviks and Jews.'<sup>49</sup> The following day was dedicated to the SS and the SA, its centrepiece a quasi-magical ceremony of consecration. In the Luitpold Arena, the Blood Flag—the flag carried in the Beer Hall Putsch and stained with the blood of the Nazi dead—was laid at the war memorial that stood at one end. After Hitler paid silent homage, it was carried behind him as he walked through formations of SA and SS, consecrating their new Nazi standards by rubbing the Blood Flag against them, a cult leader personally mediating the transfer of 'mystical energy' from one artefact to the other.<sup>50</sup>

For many historians, the annual 'Memorial Day for the Fallen of the 9 November' represents the height (or rather, the depths) of Nazi religiosity. In 1935 the sixteen Nazis who had been killed in the putsch were reinterred in two purpose-built 'Temples of Honour' (*Ehrentempel*) outside the Party headquarters on the Königsplatz. The ceremony was a Nazi Passion Play of redemptive national sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> On the evening of the 8th November the bodies were solemnly carried on caissons to the Field Marshal's Hall accompanied by the recognised veterans of the putsch, decorated with their 'Blood Order' medals. Once the dead were laid in state on the monument, Hitler mounted the steps alone to greet each of the fallen in turn. The following day the march from the beer hall was re-enacted, now a sombre drummed procession behind the Blood Flag, moving between 240 oil-burning pylons, each bearing the name of one of those killed in the party's service since 1919. At the Field Marshal's Hall, sixteen artillery shells were fired before the caskets joined the procession to the Königsplatz, accompanied now by an up-tempo national anthem to signify the move from mourning to celebration. At the *Ehrentempel* the names of the martyrs—whose blood Hitler had described as the 'baptismal water' of the Reich—were roll-called with

the putsch veterans and Hitler Youth replying, 'Present!' To the strains of the Horst Wessel Anthem, the sarcophagi were laid in the temples: colonnaded mausoleums left open to the elements that the dead may watch over the *Völk*, their symbolic honour guard mirrored in the physical one now taken up permanently at the *Ehrentempel* by the SS. Finally, in a ceremony mirroring the flag consecrations, 1800 new members of the Hitler Youth took their oath of loyalty, symbolising the transfer of the spirit of Nazism from its fallen heroes to its new vanguard. Michael Burleigh notes that from the 'Last Supper' held on the first evening in the beer hall, to his striding into the *Ehrentempel* to lay wreaths and silently commune with the martyrs, Hitler acted as saviour, the putsch veterans as his apostles.<sup>52</sup>

The question for historians is how should all this be interpreted? Many argue that the Nazis appropriated religious forms only for their demagogic value, cynically repackaging their secular ideology within a set of aggrandising rituals and symbols. The cultic aspects of Nazism were a seductive charade: an authoritarian 'method of government' in the age of mass politics.<sup>53</sup> But for political religion theorists, such arguments fail to understand that Nazi aesthetics expressed a genuine sense of transcendent higher purpose and the melding of politics with Providence. Here, they argue, Nazism responded to a popular need for the sacred, but understood the political to be the sphere in which absolute meaning would be found and sacrality genuinely experienced. Its ritual sought not merely to create a politics served by mystical sensation and emotion, but, in offering the national community as the means of immersion in a higher reality, created a politics *of* mystical sensation and emotion. Undoubtedly, Nazism was an experiment in control and subjection, the state making new total claims over both body and mind. But it was also an expression of an all-encompassing *faith*, shared by leaders and led, in the existential primacy of race and nation, and in the state as the site of its transformatory and redemptive power.

If so, the content of Nazi ritual must, then, be taken at face value as something that *could* be believed in. It expressed a world-historical mythos built on common religious tropes: creation, fall, dualism, suffering and deliverance. Nazi race politics were couched in a lapsarian myth. A pristine racial order, ordained by Providence, had been betrayed by race-mixing. The Aryan, the sole bearer of the 'divine spark of genius', had diluted his own blood and robbed it of its vitality, and so, Hitler declared in *Mein Kampf*, 'the fall of man in paradise has always been

followed by his expulsion.<sup>54</sup> Nazi racism was more than demagogic scapegoating; it was genuinely Manichaean. The Jew embodied a principle of racial evil. He was a ‘hollow’ replica of humanity, devoid of ‘true soul’ and lost in materialism, and yet he used the blood purity so readily abandoned by others to usurp the dominant position among the races.<sup>55</sup> The establishment of the national community would indeed redress the humiliations suffered by Germany since the First World War, bringing stability and economic revitalization. But these rewards would be won by the righting of the providential racial order—national salvation through atonement for the ‘original sin’ of pollution. This naturally implied a purgation.<sup>56</sup> Nazism would ‘call eternal wrath upon the head of the foul enemy of mankind.’ But whilst it was certainly apocalyptic in its hope for a final reckoning, it was too afraid of the Jews to achieve the confidence of victory that leads to millenarian expectancy.<sup>57</sup> Rather, Hitler predicted a cataclysm that would either see humanity freed from the blasphemous Jewish yoke or see the earth left to ‘move through the ether devoid of men.’<sup>58</sup> Finally, Nazi mythos revolved around the saviour-prophet who would arise to lead the chosen race towards its destiny. Perhaps no text exhibits Hitler’s messianic ‘self-dramatisation’ better than his oft-quoted speech at the 1936 Nuremberg rally:

How deeply we feel once more in this hour the miracle that has brought us together! Once you heard the voice of a man, and it spoke to your hearts, it awakened you, and you followed that voice. ...

Now that we meet here, we are filled with the wonder of this gathering. Not every one of you can see me and I do not see each of you. But I feel you, and you feel me!<sup>59</sup>

## NEW ATHEISM AND THE DEMANDS OF POLITICAL RELIGION THEORY

Political religion theory might seem to offer much to the anti-religionist side of the God debate. The approach documents the sacrality of aspects of the movement that are indisputably important, and insists that they be placed at the heart of our efforts to understand Nazism. And yet, in the end, it would demand more from the New Atheism than it offers to it.

Whether they regard it as a particular transmigration of Christian prejudice or as a more general expression of a human addiction to irrationalism, New Atheists and anti-religionists interpret Nazism as a simple

extension of the pernicious influence of religion into the modern world. There is nothing new to be understood. Totalitarianism reveals only the limitations of the Enlightenment project and, ultimately, that the secular world did not become secular enough. Political religion theory, however, suggests something far more uncomfortable for secularists: that totalitarian religiosity developed, not in spite of secularisation but because of it.

The modern world broke down traditional religious certainties, and for many secularists this is to be celebrated as the key to human liberation.<sup>60</sup> But political religion theory contends that it is a mistake to believe that the sacred itself was eroded. Instead, it was given new focuses. The nation, the race, the state, revolution and societal rebirth, science and technology, the free market, communism, industrialisation, communion with nature, the New Man, libertarianism and even modernity itself—these are only some of the myriad forms of higher reality claimed in the wake of the diminishing of traditional faith.

This might in some ways seem to accord with the New Atheists' sense of the indecent refusal of irrationalism to die under the hammer blows of modernity. But this is not what political religion theory argues, for its point is to stress that these blows were never really delivered. For the New Atheists the sacred is a pollutant, an alien left-over marked out by its unnaturalness within the culture of rational humanism. By contrast, political religion theorists see new forms of sacrality as an entirely consistent outgrowth of a process of change that assaulted traditional forms of organised faith, but which left intact a human impulse to religiosity itself, and even intensified it.

In most traditional religions, the sense of a perfect supra-worldly reality directs the mind towards escaping this-worldly existence. But, it is argued, to define the religious impulse only in such terms is to mistake its expression for its nature. Rather, the impulse is to find ultimate meaning beyond the self: to absolutise those things which confer identity and suggest purpose, and to submit one's existence to them. This need not be a remote divinity. Political or social entities may be taken to constitute an ultimate reality into which the individual is subsumed as an instrument of a higher purpose. The worldly—the immanent—as well as the transcendent might become the focus of religiosity.<sup>61</sup> Transcendent or immanent, the sacred allows individuals to become integrated in a unifying collectivity of votaries, the collectivity's dogmas and rituals, in turn, becoming the means by which it venerates and reinforces itself. In this

sense, sacralisation is not so much a condition of the presence of supernaturalism, as of the presence of society.<sup>62</sup>

Secularisation, then, disengaged the sacralising instinct from the institutional religions, but the uncoupling only allowed it to run free.<sup>63</sup> The conditions of modernity were acutely favourable to the development of new sacralities, being, in the words of historian, Emilio Gentile, 'a period of violent upheavals that destroy millennial certainties and drag humanity into a vortex of continuous change.' With the erosion of the traditional faiths, the need for the reaffirmation of identity and meaning energised rather than weakened the dynamics of sacralisation and the will to submit to new certainties. To take only one example, the state had traditionally been imbued with a quasi-magical aura, but this had relied on the anointing of rulers as conduits of God's power. No longer dependent on the Church to confer sacrality, the state could now appear to be possessed of majestic power *of itself* and so become the object of direct veneration. By this argument, then, it was entirely consistent that secularisation, rather than promoting the self-assured abandonment of religious subjection, should reframe and reinforce cultures of self-sacrificing reverence now focused on the meaning-giving authority of political and social entities. The development cannot even be seen as ironic.

National Socialism constituted an extreme manifestation of this 'inner-worldly' religion (Voegelin). Defeat in the First World War, political instability in Weimar, extreme economic failure and cultural anomie produced an acute susceptibility to the attractions of political religion in the search for national and personal rebirth. Individual historians differ widely as to the exact relationship between the objects of Nazi sacralisation, the extent of its underlying supernaturalism, and whether political religion grew out of Christianity or paganism. But all agree that its central characteristic was the deification of the worldly and local 'realities' of race and nation, and we can gain a sense of how such analyses function. The German historian, Klaus Vondung, for example, argues that National Socialism found its higher reality in the notion of the superior common blood. Hitler's 'baptismal water' was believed to endure through the ages as the source of Aryan vitality, passing from generation to generation a form of racial immortality. This was the 'sacral centre' around which revolved a redefinition of state, social and even ecological realities:



With National Socialism, the centre is the blood. As the substantive carrier of the blood, there is the nation. Thence follow as sacred symbols the soil, as the land upon which the nation was nourished, the Reich, as the unit in which it was politically actualised, the Führer, as the representative of both nation and Reich, and the flag.<sup>64</sup>

The anthropologist, Karla Poewe, offers instead the image of a hydra. The sacralized centre of Nazism was *Völk*, *Völksgemeinschaft* and Führer (the vertebrae in the neck, as it were), but it tolerated a wide eclecticism (the multiple heads) with regards to the mythologies by which these were expressed, from Alfred Rosenberg's medievalism to the ancestral cult of Heinrich Himmler's SS to Joseph Goebbels' lapsed-Catholic yearning for salvation in the deification of Hitler.<sup>65</sup>

Blood, nation, soil, the racial state and the leader-prophet were not, then, the lenses through which Germans might perceive a supra-worldly god. They were the actual entities in which they were to have faith; the things they were, quite literally, to *believe in*. The national community was elevated to the status of a church, but one that offered the possibility of uniting with its ultimate reality in the here and now. Whilst they remained very far from engaging much of the population, Vondung notes that the Nazis planned extending their rituals into school, workplace and family. The aim was to interlace all aspects of public and private existence with reverence for the idea of National Socialism and so to absorb the individual by making his or her life a confession of the faith.<sup>66</sup> The national community as a Church, then, was the point of convergence between totalitarian demand and popular voluntarism.<sup>67</sup>

In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris quotes the then Deputy Führer, Rudolf Hess, speaking in 1934:

The National Socialism of all of us is anchored in uncritical loyalty, in the surrender to the Führer that does not ask for the why in individual cases, in the silent execution of his orders. We believe that the Führer is obeying a higher call to fashion German history. There can be no criticism of this belief.

Richard Dawkins offers the pseudo-prayer of Robert Ley, the head of the German Labour Front, that declared 'On this earth we believe only in Adolf Hitler.' Christopher Hitchens tells us that in totalitarianism lies the love of 'abject glorification.'<sup>68</sup> Each expresses revulsion and seeks to

provoke it, and for good polemical reasons. As we share their disgust at Nazi abjections, we may recall our similar repulsion at the self-imposed indignities we believe we see in church congregations and understand that both are forms of our same cultural Other. It is an efficient means of turning what we would like to believe about ourselves—the passionate humanist individualism that drives our repugnance at self-abasement—into an analytical barometer. Because *we* respond to Nazi and traditional religious devotion in the same way, *they* must be the same and equally alien to us. Emotional response becomes evidence.

Except that political religion theory—the analytical model that justifies taking Nazi devotions as more than propagandist simulacra—suggests that things are not nearly so easy.

To see Nazism as a form of political religion would entail accepting that there exist new forms of religiosity that belong only to modernity. If political religion itself is dependent upon secularisation, the Third Reich could not, therefore, have existed (at least in the form that it took) without the peculiar relationship between secularism and the sacralising impulse. Moreover, it would have to be conceded that Nazism was a logical, if extreme, product of secularisation rather than an instance in which the process went awry or was subverted. Historians of political religion do not argue that totalitarian religiosity emerged inevitably out of secularisation—they do not claim that modernity is fascist. But nor do they seek to contrast a compromised secularity with an unrealised perfect version and so bemoan a lost opportunity. Instead, they wish to understand secularisation *as it was* and to explain why it was so. The theory cannot be an exculpatory prop for secular idealism because within it there is no alternative perfect secularism to protect.

The New Atheist approach to the ‘problem’ of religion is to assume that, as a collection of specific beliefs, it can potentially be argued out of existence by a concerted attack upon the content of faith. Thus we have Sam Harris’ demand for cultural war upon virgin births and winged horses, or we have Christopher Hitchens’ call for a New Enlightenment powered by the potential for the mass understanding of science.<sup>69</sup> But to acknowledge the reality of political religion would be to accept both that something like *homo religiosus* exists, and that history suggests that arguing supernaturalism out of existence is not the same thing as dissolving religion. The fading of the divine, it proposes, would likely be accompanied by the further unshackling of the sacralising impulse, and by the emergence of new higher truths to offer meaning and belonging

beyond the self. A.C. Grayling has pointed out that, whilst Christianity attempted to subdue the sexual impulse by denying it stimuli, '[i]f you dam a river it will flood elsewhere in awkward and unexpected ways.'<sup>70</sup> Political religion theory suggests that a militant atheism that mistakes supernaturalism for religion is likely to make the same mistake.<sup>71</sup>

If they are determined to pursue the polemical blame game surrounding the link between irrationalism, religiosity and violence, Nazism as political religion could offer New Atheists and anti-religionists some powerful ammunition. But it would come at the cost of radically reorienting their expectations as to the process of de-faithing society. They would have to accept what they so far will not countenance: that the atheisation they yearn for has the strong potential to be a self-defeating process, in which a simplistic cultural war of telling people that they are wrong will not suffice to change their behaviour, whilst offering alternative forms of higher meaning will likely lead to the development of this-worldly religions. It would, in effect, significantly lessen the distance between them and their critics such as Karen Armstrong, who emphasises the existence of *homo religiosus*, and John Gray, who warns of the continued prevalence of myths of higher meaning and salvation in secular society, now focused around science and the 'illusion' of progress.<sup>72</sup> In terms of their highly moralised sense of the failings of the religious, it would, in the end, come at the cost of accepting that history has shown secularism to be no barrier to irrationalism, to the yearning to find higher entities to submit one's existence to, or even to self-abasement. The things they affect to despise are, political religion theory would insist, much closer to them than they would like to admit.

### THE HOLY REICH CONTROVERSY

What of the current alternative to political religion theory available to the anti-religionist cause? Richard Steigmann-Gall's book, *The Holy Reich*, has had a higher profile outside academia than many of the studies of political religion, and it has made some impression on popular anti-religionism, albeit its impact has been surprisingly limited. The book is occasionally referred to for support by Hector Avelos, whilst the wider atheist blogosphere tends simply to state that an academic historian has claimed Christianity to have been central to Nazism, as if anti-religionists ought to take reassurance from that fact alone. The book suffers, it appears, from being more cited than read. Yet it is worth considering *The*

*Holy Reich* for precisely the reason that it is the foremost academic study to attempt to show *how* Christianity was integral to Nazism. But even here, things are not quite so straightforward as New Atheists and anti-religionists might expect.

For Steigmann-Gall, historians have argued themselves into asking the wrong questions about Nazi religiosity. That many Christians welcomed Nazism's social conservatism and its anti-Semitic and anti-Marxist prejudices has been well documented, yet remaining has been an untested presumption that the attraction was unrequited. This sense has, Steigmann-Gall believes, led historians to ponder an artificial question: 'how could there be a pro-Nazi element within German Christianity but not a pro-Christian element within Nazism?' Either such Christians were self-deluding or they were not, after all, really Christian. Yet, if Nazism did contain a genuine Christian element, then these interpretations have been offering superfluous explanations for a problem that does not exist, whilst ignoring legitimate questions as to what Nazi Christianity might have been.<sup>73</sup>

*The Holy Reich*, then, sets out to redress the imbalance by examining seriously the views of those Nazi leaders who expressed an open Christianity as part of the logic of their National Socialism. Such men included the playwright and founding Nazi, Dietrich Eckhart (d. 1923), Joseph Goebbels (Propaganda Minister), Artur Dinter (*Gauleiter* of Thuringia), Walter Buch (chairman of the Nazi party court) and Hans Schemm (head of the National Socialist Teachers' League). According to Steigmann-Gall, foremost among these pro-Christian Nazis was, unequivocally, Adolf Hitler.

In their founding 25 Points of February 1920, the Nazi Party claimed to espouse

a positive Christianity, without tying itself to a particular confession. It fights the spirit of Jewish materialism within and without us, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our *Völk* can only take place from within, on the basis of the principle: public need comes before private greed.<sup>74</sup>

Most historians dismiss Positive Christianity as a tactical smokescreen. But Steigmann-Gall identifies three central principles of its sincerity. First, the sense that the Jew was not only the material but also the spiritual nemesis of the Aryan. Second, was that the communitarianism

of the German *völksgemeinschaft*—‘Public need before private greed’—was, to them, unambiguously a political re-framing of Christian *caritas*. Last was the sense that a unified Germanic culture must imply a new national religion that would bridge the damaging divide between Protestant and Catholic.<sup>75</sup>

It is often assumed that a distaste for modernist decadence provoked the Nazis to idealise a primordial pre-Christian faith. Steigmann-Gall contends that the same concerns could instead lead them to find inspiration in the figure of Christ. Thus, Eckhart claimed that ‘[i]n Christ, the embodiment of all manliness, we find all we need.’ In his rejection of materialism, in his absolute separation of good and evil, in his struggle to force redemption on an unwilling humanity and in his heroic suffering and sacrifice, Christ embodied the virtues that the Nazis saw as indispensable to the creation of their *Völk*, and so his virtues were essentially *völkisch*.<sup>76</sup>

The paramount virtue was anti-Semitism. The story of the whipping of the moneylenders from the temple was widely celebrated,<sup>77</sup> and Goebbels declared in his novel, *Michael* (1929): ‘Christ is the genius of love, as such the most diametrical opposite of Judaism, which is the incarnation of hate.’ That Christ himself must have been Aryan became an issue of faith, placed beyond rational question. ‘Christ cannot have been a Jew’, Goebbels insisted, ‘I do not need to prove this with science or scholarship. It is so!’ For Hitler in 1921, ‘I can imagine Christ as nothing other than blond and with blue eyes.’<sup>78</sup> The Old Testament polluted and sullied the Aryan message of Christ and it was this that Hitler referred to when, in set of notes of 1919, he stressed the need for the ‘purification’ of scripture.<sup>79</sup> What set Christ apart was his pursuit of transcendence amidst a culture (or rather, an anti-culture) that was savagely materialist. The modern Aryan shared racially this intuitive sense of the divine. Thus, for Eckhart, ‘To be an Aryan and to sense transcendence are one and the same thing.’ The supernaturalism was genuine and emphasised the divinity of the individual soul and the sense of a personal God. The Aryan, then, as the most spiritual of humanity, was in natural sympathy with Christ’s message, whilst, in the words of Walter Buch, the saviour’s ‘entire character and learning betrayed Germanic blood.’ In such terms, Steigmann-Gall argues, racial and religious categories came to imply each other.<sup>80</sup>

Positive Christianity was not an outsider’s contrivance bearing no relationship to trends within contemporary Christian theology. Rather

it shared much with respectable, if idiosyncratic, positions within contemporary Protestantism. In the second half of the nineteenth century, had developed an increasingly providential interpretation of German nationhood. It was a position which naturally moralised responses to both war and defeat, especially in the sense that only the abandonment of God could account for the humiliation suffered in 1918. 'For many Christians', Steigmann-Gall notes, 'Weimar's very existence signalled a profound assault on God's order' and a tangible indication of the need to turn back to a Germanic faith.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the Nazis' fusing of religious and racial categories had been anticipated by trends in liberal Protestantism which sought to use racial science to explain the failure to convert the Jews after emancipation. The Jews turned out not to be misguided believers in the same God, but were perniciously and immutably separate, racially unable to share in Christ's message. On this basis, many liberal Protestants themselves advocated measures such as expunging of the Old Testament. With such 'departures' apparent within Protestantism, the Nazis' own call to purify the faith 'cannot be used to demonstrate an antithesis to Christianity.'<sup>82</sup>

Steigmann-Gall's work would perhaps seem to offer more to the New Atheism than studies of political religion. He is unequivocal that leading Nazis conceived of a genuine spirituality as intrinsic to their superior race. An atheist, or even secularised Aryanism would have been meaningless to them. Nor was their God an invention intended to redirect the spiritual instinct away from Christianity. Like so many reformers before them, they believed they had rediscovered what the faith had lost. In this sense, Nazism contained within it another of the many attempts to recover a pure Christianity.<sup>83</sup> If the idea of a Nazified Christianity jars with our understanding of what Christianity is, it is because this particular reformation failed to take hold and so gain the legitimacy that all such movements only achieve in retrospect. From a New Atheist perspective, then, Steigmann-Gall's Positive Christianity might seem to give real weight to the idea that Nazism represented an idiosyncratic continuation of the history of religious malevolence.

But any such polemical appeal to *The Holy Reich* would have to be made in the understanding that the book sparked intense, and sometimes bad-tempered controversy.<sup>84</sup> Steigmann-Gall has been accused of elevating the views of a small number of essentially marginal figures in the Nazi movement above those of much more influential individuals and groups—such as Alfred Rosenberg, Martin Bormann, Baldur von Schirach,

the SS and the Hitler Youth—who were explicitly anti-Christian.<sup>85</sup> His critics contend that very real ideological tensions appear to get lost in the analysis. Ersnt Piper, for example, notes that ‘positive’ Christianity implied a ‘negative’ version to be condemned. This Rosenberg explicitly defined as including the Passion and resurrection, vindication through faith, the remission of sins through grace and *caritas*. Positive Christianity, Piper argues, replaced the personal communion with God, and the search for the afterlife, with the individuality-dissolving immersion in the this-life of the racial community.<sup>86</sup> The end of Paragraph 24 of the NSDAP programme—which he translates as ‘the principle of the common good before the individual’—should be read, not as expressing the desire for a new *völkisch* Christian social ethic, but as placing religion within the sphere of those individualities that were to be subsumed in the pursuit of racial homogeneity.<sup>87</sup> Anti-Christian action, a number of critics point out, was real and was ‘sufficient to put the Churches in a defensive position that in turn made their leaders eager to co-operate in Nazi projects.’<sup>88</sup> But also real was Christian resistance. *The Holy Reich*, it is suggested, creates an impression of peaceful coexistence that does not reflect the reality of a far more unstable relationship.<sup>89</sup>

Steigmann-Gall’s work has many advocates, and he has responded robustly to his critics, but, where it concerns itself with the issue of Nazi Christianity, the New Atheism visits an area of history in which extensive and nuanced debate is still very much ongoing.

For all that, the attraction of Steigmann-Gall’s work for anti-religionists would be obvious and hardly unwarranted. Where ought atheists and secularists to go when theists tell them they bear primary responsibility for the Holocaust? The existence of serious historical work finding a substantive Christianity within National Socialism is bound to be highly significant to the contest that both sides are determined to pursue. But the danger is that again it would be taken to stand alone as the last word in an argument for which it was never intended. Viewing *The Holy Reich* more correctly within the controversy it provoked requires accepting that currently we have no definitive answer to the question of the nature of the relationship between Christianity and Nazism. It may instil a more reasonable uncertainty sufficient to cool the polemical fervour of both sides.

Cannot New Atheists and anti-religionists at least be confident that they are aligned with an important trend within Nazi scholarship,

however controversial? In fact, no. In the end, *The Holy Reich* would, again, demand more than it would offer.

Steigmann-Gall self-consciously places his study among those arguing that Nazism should not be seen as a failure of civilisation, but rather its product.<sup>9</sup> He is influenced by the Polish sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, whom he quotes,

We suspect (even if we refuse to admit it) that the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire...What we perhaps fear most, is that each of the two faces can no more exist without the other than can the two sides of a coin.

...often we stop just at the threshold of the awesome truth...that every ingredient of the Holocaust – all those things that rendered it possible – was normal.

The aim of *The Holy Reich* is to show that the ideological ground shared between National Socialism and Christianity was another ‘ingredient of that normalcy.’<sup>90</sup>

The Third Reich is our most useful moral foil, Steigmann-Gall argues, ‘the world-historical metaphor for human evil’ understandable only in its distance from our social and moral norms.<sup>91</sup> So we efficiently communicate the turpitude of that which we dislike when we claim that it was integral to Nazism. The opposite holds true for the things we admire. Christianity has benefited from this mythologising process in societies that retain a habitual sense of the religion as the fundamental moral arbiter. The exposure of its complicity is unconscionable if we wish to maintain our useful, and comforting, sense of the aberrance and uncivilisation of Nazism. The shock may perhaps be as profound as that Bauman describes, but the acceptance of a congruence between Christianity and the Third Reich may, in Steigmann-Gall’s view, be integral to the ongoing process of realising that Nazism ‘is that much closer to us than we dare allow ourselves to believe.’<sup>92</sup>

In the minds of the New Atheists, Nazism and Christianity become the most obvious of bedfellows. But, unlike Bauman or Steigmann-Gall, their intention is not to dissolve our moral Other but to refashion it. They will reassert the distance between the Holocaust and ‘true’ civilisation, and so to find it a crime worthy of the extreme malignancy of faith. They do not seek to provide a salutary illustration of where ‘normal’



Christian tenets can lead within extreme sociopolitical contexts, but yet another powerful demonstration—perhaps the single most powerful—of what it means to free religion from the yoke of civilisation. ‘[W]hat we suppose Nazism must surely have been about’, Steigmann-Gall notes, ‘usually tells us as much about contemporary societies as about the past purportedly under review.’ The anti-religionist appropriation of the Holocaust indeed tells us much. In the end, we are left with the question as to what we actually identify as the New Atheists’ moral foil. For it is difficult to determine whether they view Nazism as the ‘world-historical metaphor for evil’ by which religion should be judged or religion as ‘world-historical metaphor for evil’ by which Nazism should be judged.

## NOTES

1. For example, *GiNG*, chapter 17; *IDoA*, 180, 189–190, 193–194; *TEoF*, 79; *TDG*, 314–315; *TtL*, 163–170.
2. *TNA*, 114.
3. For only a handful of examples see P. Z. Myers, ‘List of Hitler Quotes—He Was Quite the Vocal Catholic’, *Pharyngula*, 23 August 2006, <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/08/23/list-of-hitler-quotes-he-was-q/>; ‘Hitler’s Christianity’, *NoBeliefs.com*, <http://www.nobeliefs.com/Hitler1.htm>; ‘Hitler Was a Christian: The Holocaust Was Caused by Christian Fundamentalism’, *Evilbible.com*, [http://www.evilbible.com/hitler\\_was\\_christian.htm](http://www.evilbible.com/hitler_was_christian.htm); ‘Debate: Was Hitler a Christian’, *Rational Wiki*, [http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Debate:Was\\_Hitler\\_a\\_Christian%3F](http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Debate:Was_Hitler_a_Christian%3F).
4. Richard C. Carrier, ‘Was Hitler “Anti-Christian”? On the Trail of Bogus Quotes’, *Freethought Today*, vol. 19 (9) (2002), <http://ffrf.org/legacy/fttoday/2002/nov02/carrier.php>.
5. *IDoA*, 186–187.
6. *TDG*, 310–312.
7. *GiNG*, 237, 250.
8. *TEoF*, 79.
9. Gregory S. Paul, ‘The Great Scandal (Part Two): Christianity’s Role in the Rise of the Nazis’, *Free Inquiry*, vol. 24 (6) (2004), [http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=paul\\_24\\_1](http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=paul_24_1).
10. This is discussed in part three.
11. John Toland, *Hitler: The Definitive Biography* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 703; Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), 429.
12. *TGD*, 310; Paul, ‘The Great Scandal (Part Two)’.
13. Two of the most often quoted are to be found in Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Pimlico, 1992), 60, 512.

14. Norman H. Baynes (ed.), *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, April 1922–August 1939, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 19–20.
15. For examples of the quote used in this way see *TGD*, 311–312; Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 40.
16. Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, 19.
17. *Ibid.*, 20.
18. Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great About Christianity?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2007), 221–222.
19. Richard C. Carrier, ‘Hitler’s Table Talk: Troubling Finds’, *German Studies Review*, vol. 26 (3) (2003), 561–576; A shorter version of the article was printed as ‘Was Catholic Hitler “Anti-Christian”: On the Trial of Bogus Quotes’, *Freethought Today*, vol. 19 (9) (2002), available at <http://ffrf.org/legacy/fttoday/2002/nov02/carrier.php>.
20. The latest edition of the Trevor-Roper *Table Talk* includes a new forward by Gerhard Weinberg which confirms that the English text indeed derives from Genoud’s French and suggests that this may have been the result of complex legal disputes over copyright between the holders of the various manuscript versions going on at the time.
21. Carrier, ‘Hitler’s Table Talk: Troubling Finds’, 566–568.
22. *AWNtCotH*, 380–383; D’Souza, *What’s so Great About Christianity*, 222.
23. *IDoA*, 237.
24. *AWNtCotH*, 375
25. *IDoA*, 164–165.
26. *Ibid.*, 186–187.
27. Stiegmamm-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 28–32, 36–37, 42.
28. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 277–278.
29. *Ibid.*, 278.
30. As was the case with many Nazis, Hitler refused to accept that Christ had been a Jew himself.
31. Stiegmamm-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 18–24, 27–37.
32. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 279.
33. *Ibid.*, 412.
34. *Ibid.*, 413, original emphasis.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *AWNtCotH*, 387; the quote is taken from Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 226. The emphasis is Avelos’.
37. ‘Therefore give not your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for you sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong...’.
38. *AWNtCotH*, 387.
39. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 226.
40. *Ibid.*, 227–232.

41. Ibid., 225.
42. Ibid., 258–260.
43. Roger Griffin, ‘God’s Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion’, in Roger Griffin (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.
44. *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, first published in summer 2000.
45. For instance Michael Burleigh’s *The Third Reich* (2000), his two-part study of political religion in Europe, *Earthly Powers* (2005) and *Sacred Causes* (2006); Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia* (2004); Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (2005).
46. Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 4–6.
47. Hans Maier, ‘Political Religion: A Concept and Its Limitations’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, vol. 8 (1) (2007), 7.
48. Stephen Brockman, *Nuremberg: The Imaginary Capital* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), 152–162, quote at 154; Hans-Ulrich Thamer, ‘The Orchestration of the National Community: The Nuremberg Party Rallies of the NSDAP’, in Günter Berghaus (ed.), *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925–1945* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), 183–185.
49. Ibid., 182; Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, 113.
50. Thamer, ‘The Orchestration of the National Community’, 182; Brockman, *Nuremberg*, 159.
51. Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 264.
52. Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, 114–115; Jay W. Baird, *To Die For Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 58–63.
53. Emilio Gentile, *Politics and Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 4–5, 142–143.
54. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 263, 265.
55. Ibid., 286.
56. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 260–261.
57. Overy, *The Dictators*, 584–585.
58. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 584–585, 60.
59. Quoted in J. P. Stern, *Hitler: The Führer and the People* (London: Fontana, 1990, 1st ed. 1975), 74. See also Bucher, *Hitler’s Theology*, 51–53; Baynes, *Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, 659–660.
60. *WiG; TtL; AAG; TGA*.
61. Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 6–7.
62. Ibid., 8.
63. Ibid., 12–13.

64. Klaus Vondung, 'Religious Faith' in National Socialism', in H. Maier and M. Schäfer. (eds.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships*, trans. J. Bruhn (London: Routledge, 2004–2007), 7.
65. Karla Poewe, *New Religions and The Nazis* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6–7; for a discussion of Himmler's occultism see Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter 10.
66. Vondung, "Religious Faith" in National Socialism', 6–11.
67. Political religion as an interpretation of National Socialism has proven highly controversial, especially among those who maintain an instrumentalist interpretation of Nazi aesthetics, those who believe Nazism was lacking the supernaturalism to qualify as religious, and those who argue that political religion, understanding the movement through analogy with what had gone before, does not sufficiently capture the radical novelty of totalitarianism. For a flavour of these objections see Hans Mommsen, 'National Socialism as a political religion', 159; Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 127–129; Neil Gregor, 'Nazism—A Political Religion?', 9–13; Stanley Stowers, 'The Concepts of "Religion", "Political Religion" and the Study of Nazism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42 (1) (2007), 9–24; Richard Steigmann-Gall, 'Nazism and the Revival of Political Religion Theory', in Griffin (ed.), *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 86; David D. Roberts, "Political Religion" and the Totalitarian Departures of Inter-War Europe: On the Uses and Disadvantages of an Analytical Category', *Contemporary European History*, vol. 18 (4) (2009), 381–414.
68. *TEoF*, 100; *TGD*, 315; *GiNG*, 231.
69. Harris, 'Science Must Destroy Religion', 150–153; *TNA*, 244, *GiNG*, 283.
70. Grayling, *The Reason of Things*, 45–47.
71. The German historian, Hans Maier, on political religion and totalitarianism: 'it reminds us that religion does not allow itself to be easily banished from society, and that, where this is tried, it returns in unpredictable and perverted forms', 'Political Religion: A Concept and Its Limitations', 15.
72. Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God; What Religion Really Means* (London: Bodley Head, 2009); John Gray, *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions* (London: Granta Books, 2004), especially Part 1; id., *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2008).
73. Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 3–10.
74. Quoted in *ibid.*, 14.

75. Ibid., chapters 1 and 2.
76. Ibid., 18–24,
77. Although, in the light of Michel Onfray's arguments, it should be pointed out that nowhere does Steigmann-Gall suggest that John 2:15 was taken as a direct inspiration for genocide.
78. Ibid., 29–37.
79. Ibid., 20, 27, 32.
80. Ibid., 30–33, quotes at 30 and 33.
81. Ibid., 15–17, 42–44, 52–53, quotes at 15 and 17.
82. Ibid., 37–41, quote at 41.
83. This argument is, in fact, made by Hector Avelos, although here he makes no reference to Steigmann-Gall for support. See *AWNtCotH*, 377–380.
84. Doris L. Bergen, 'Nazism and Christianity: Partners and Rivals? A Response to Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich. Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42 (1) (2007), 28, 29; Irving Hexham, 'Inventing "Paganists": A Close Reading of Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42 (1) (2007), 59–65; Manfred Gailus, 'A Strange Obsession with Nazi Christianity: A Critical Comment on Richard Steigmann-Gall's *The Holy Reich*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42 (1) (2007), 39–40.
85. Ernst Piper, 'Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 42 (1) (2007), 51–54; Hexham, 'Inventing Paganists', 65–75; Poewe, *New Religions and the Nazis*, 8.
86. Piper, 'Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*', 49; Irving Hexham, 'The Mythic Foundation of National Socialism and the Contemporary Claim That the Nazis Were Christians', *Koers* 76 (1) (2011), 164–167.
87. Piper, 'Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*', 48.
88. Bergen, 'Nazism and Christianity', 32; Piper, 'Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*', 53.
89. Gailus, 'A Strange Obsession with Nazi Christianity', 43; Bergen, 'Nazism and Christianity', 32.
90. Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 261.
91. Ibid., 266.
92. Ibid., 267.

## Minds in Opposition

If modern humans have walked on the earth for at least 200,000 years, it has taken just around a millennia and a half to make their lives worth living. That is the period, roughly, of the flourishing of rational thought, with its beautiful offspring: science, freedom and the rejection of God. For most of the journey a darkness lay upon humans' understanding of the world, and so their steps were timorous. They imagined great terrors lurking in the gloom that enveloped their minds, and they sought only the means to hold them at bay. They abased themselves before their fears, they offered up sacrifices, and they accepted the tyranny of those who claimed to transact with the invisible powers and to command in their name.

Yet, had they but known it, humans always held within them the power to dispel the darkness. For they could reason. Against reason the dark might struggle but it must, in the end, give way. The first candle was lit on a Greek island around 580 BC and the gloom began immediately to recede. As it lifted no terrors were uncovered for they had never really been there. Generations of philosophers in Athens and Alexandria taught mankind how to begin to see the world for what it was. It took some 1600 years to drive the darkness back, but the span of the process was closer to 3000. For mankind sabotaged its own emancipation. The greatest empire the world had yet seen was subverted and then conquered by the foreign cult of a dead messiah. That the dark should be restored became the open policy of Christian Rome. Its people conspired

to forget what they had seen in the light. They bequeathed the gloom to those who would come after them and demanded again the veneration of craven superstition.

For a thousand years civilisation was thus retarded, its people brought low by the cruelties of a world their masters now *chose* not to let them understand and kept docile by the promise of a paradise after death. Those who did dare to question met only condemnation and violence from the Church. Such was the grip of Christian superstition that, when the pagan enlightenment was rediscovered in fourteenth-century Italy, its early adherents strained to harmonise its insights with the faith they took for granted. These harmonies were at best mirages confusing the over-eager senses of those who fancied they observed them. Those who stepped boldly into the light had, in the end, to acknowledge that mankind's faith had always been empty.

As science broke its fetters the glare of enlightenment increased and the dark drew further and further back until it resided only as a shadow at the horizon. There it remains, although the hope of science is that humanity may yet be rid of it forever. Some have been content to bask in the light and revel in the clarity of sight it affords. The reward for these men and women has been, for the first time in human history, the experience of genuine freedom. Others, however, have found the glare too intense and have shrunk from the adventure. The vistas uncovered by the retreating dark are simply too great, the prospect of exploring them too daunting. They prefer the gloom and its illusory terrors, the comforting smallness of its world and the security of ignorant passivity. So they treasure the memory of the dark, they try to convince themselves it has not really gone away and they seek out the few remaining shadows before which to abase themselves.

Or so the New Atheism and the wider current of militant anti-religionism would have us believe.

Grand narratives of the three thousand year war between rationalism and faith are a broader form of anti-religious black legend, and they are the history of preference for the recent polemicists. 'My claim', A. C. Grayling tells us in *What is Good?*,

is that most human progress has occurred in the face of religious reaction, and that most human suffering other than that caused by disease or other natural evils has been the result of religion-inspired conflict and religion-based oppression. This is an unhappy fact, but one that is overwhelmingly attested by the evidence of history.<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Hitchens leavens these sentiments with a considerable dose of hyperbole, demanding that anti-religion be considered the first principle of *all* human progress:

[t]he argument with faith is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning—but not the end—of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature. It is also the beginning—but not the end—of all disputes about the good life and the just city.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the New Atheists appeal to the popular idea that the ultimate triumph of science lay not only in the formation of a body of accurate physical knowledge, but also in the breaking of the hold of religion over the human imagination.

This is the context of, in Hitchens' words, the 'finer tradition' of the 'resistance of the rational.' The claim is that there have always been a minority of courageous individuals able to break through the intellectual barriers set by faith, and so to provide the key to human advancement. A range of figures as diverse as Democritus, Socrates, Epicurus, Lucretius, Nicholas d'Autrecourt, Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo, Spinoza, Bayle, Voltaire, Hume, d'Holbach, Darwin and Nietzsche are marshalled into a single linear narrative in which each either anticipates modern secular rationalism or contributes directly to its formation. Besides their rationalism, it is stressed, these heroes share the quality of noble victimhood, each having been persecuted by the Church, either in their lifetime or posthumously.<sup>3</sup>

Here, then, lies the other side of the perennality argument: that accompanying religion's inbuilt destructiveness is a constancy of intellectual weakness revealed by believers' simple inability to grasp the truths offered by rationalism. New Atheists who elaborate on the 'finer tradition'—Hitchens, Onfray, Stenger, Grayling—do not, of course, claim that a single ideology links thousands of years of rationalist thinking. But they do suggest the existence of a characteristic mindset taken to be superior to its theistic counterpart. Rationalists doubt. They question and refuse to take on trust. They ask for reason at least and for evidence at best. Their demanding philosophies stand in stark contrast to the intellectual timidity and ossification encouraged by religion, and, as they lurk in the background of any age of faith, or even shout their presence, they provide the measure of its weakness.

More nuanced pictures are available. The historian, Jennifer Michael Hecht, has produced a detailed history of doubt, attempting to identify



its patterns (she discerns seven), and arguing that, rather than fundamental opposites, belief and doubt have been alternative results of contemplating ‘the great schism’ between humans’ experience of ‘reason and plans, love, and purpose’ and their acute awareness that the universe appears empty of such qualities. Both faith and doubt have attempted to overcome the ‘meaning-rupture’ caused by the fact that ‘we are human and the universe is not.’ The one seeks to expose the schism as a fallacy and reveal the hidden purpose of the universe, the other attempts to discern what the fact of the unhuman universe ought to mean for us once we accept it. Hecht’s sympathy clearly lies with the second approach and she self-consciously offers her history as a supportive tradition for modern secularism and an inspiration to pursue the ‘joy of doubt.’<sup>4</sup> But in allowing that religion and scepticism might have the same contemplative starting point, she pays belief the respect of according it serious origins and a real problem to address.

The contrast with the New Atheism is stark. Hitchens makes extensive use of Hecht’s book in his chapter on ‘the finer tradition’ (half of his citations are taken from it) and yet he takes no account whatsoever of her argument. Instead, he simply employs the book as a repository of examples of doubt, extracting a number and *précising* them as if statement alone was enough to make obvious both their superiority and the superiority of mind that produced them. No attempt is made to set them in their historical context or to consider the force of criticisms that might have been made of them, and the narrative is merely punctuated with the appearance of faceless theistic persecutors whose lack of identity allows their opposition to rationalism to appear emptily habitual. In Hitchens’ book, Hecht’s tradition ceases to be one of the two historically great ways in which humans have sought to address the perplexities of their condition. It becomes instead the only respectable form of philosophy, carefully isolated from a religious urge itself belittled as infantile and as the coward’s resort to safety in ignorance.<sup>5</sup>

Constructing such histories affords a number of polemical advantages. Again, the sense of perennality—this time of intellectual inequality—allows New Atheists and anti-religionists to avoid engaging with the complexities of current relationships between science and faith. Modern fundamentalism need not be understood as the recent development of a specific form of religious radicalism distinguished by its unusually vehement rejection of scientific orthodoxy. Instead, it can be presented simply as the most undiluted continuation of religion’s natural antipathy. By

extension, attempts on the part of religious moderates to engage with science also need not upset the certainty of the 'warfare' narrative, since they must be understood to be dependent on the artificial suppression of the theist's natural mental allergy. So clear and so immutable is the distinction that professional scientists who spend their Sundays in the nave and their weekdays in the lab must be understood to have two brains in one. They are 'compartmentalists', giving themselves over to whichever of their minds is best suited to the room they are in.

The New Atheists identify the 'finer tradition' itself as their own, flattering themselves with nobility and illustrious company. As they survey the vast span of history, and their eyes light again and again on the mental weakness of the faithful, they betray no hint of suspicion that they might ever have been among them. They are deeply sympathetic to the plight of our ancestors who, before science, struggled with the fear of so much that was unknown and uncontrolled, and who resorted to religion. But they see nothing of themselves, only a mass of victims to be condescendingly 'understood.' They, they clearly believe, would never have been so deceived. 'I would always be an infidel at all times and in all places', Hitchens declares implausibly.<sup>6</sup> Their sympathy is an observer's pity for the herd, their kindred spirits instead the brave individualists who stood out in the face of certain persecution, or the quiet rationalists who saw the folly of their neighbours, and left them to it, but who knew the truth.

But more important is the role of hindsight in creating an impression of a constant philosophical rectitude. Those naturalistic aspects of historical rationalism and proto-science that appear most familiar to us are represented as fundamental and defining. Their similarities to modern scientific understandings are taken always to be prescient rather than coincidental. By contrast, those aspects that appear tainted with theism or that suggest a remoteness from modern thought are either ignored entirely or are explained away as ephemera produced by the cultural dominance of religion. What is never asked is whether naturalism was vulnerable to serious and reasoned criticism and whether theism might have held sway because in numerous historical contexts it appeared a more logical explanation for the world than materialism. Instead, the apparent fruitfulness of early rationalism is contrasted with the supposed tendency of theism to divert the human intellectual journey into one cul-de-sac after another. Thus, a sense is created of the superiority of the non-theistic mind—or at the very least of the mind struggling with

theism—in all periods and in all contexts. The story of rationalism confers authority on the New Atheism by allowing it to be taken as the latest episode in a long history of ‘being right.’

As with the anti-religious black legends, the history upon which these claims are made is misrepresented and often mythologised. Whilst there have indeed been many points of conflict between religion and science, no serious historian of the subject now accepts the warfare narrative. Instead, they highlight the complex interactions that shaped the relationship. They respect the diversity of belief and temperament among proto-scientists and their opponents, and exhibit a deep sensitivity to the role of culture in shaping scientific endeavour and affecting its outcomes. It is a history in which simplistic claims to prescience, and to the existence of essential qualities of mind divorced from culture, no longer sit comfortably. All of this mitigates against the casual historicising of an opposition of perennial and unequal mindsets, and it dissolves the polemical capital the New Atheists believe they have attained.

Any secularist must believe that there is a very great deal to celebrate in the history of doubt, and we are entitled to think that rationalism has contributed more to human progress than any other form of intellectual engagement with the natural world. But we are not entitled to artificially create a superior tradition by simply extracting a series of rationalists from the historical contexts in which their ideas were formed and very often seriously challenged. We are not entitled to conjure an illusion of perennial superiority by an act of retrograde intellectual insulation. Rationalism has never held a monopoly of insight, nor religion a monopoly of dogmatism, and there is a category of doubt neglected even by Hecht. Whatever conclusions we reach about the relationship between religion and rationalism/science today, in the past there were valid reasons to doubt the claims made by opponents of theism and even to question their rationality. Perenniality is no more a valid category for the celebration of rationalism than for the condemnation of theism.

Such is the scope of the tradition alluded to by the New Atheists that it would take a separate (and extremely long) book to examine them. But we can take a few steps in exploring these issues by looking at two areas in which historians have revealed very different pictures to those offered in anti-religious polemic. The first area is the ancient Greek philosophy of atomism. This is declared by New Atheists and anti-religionists to be the archetype of the rationalism that is claimed as their inheritance, and to be a philosophy to which allergic reactions in the

theistic mind have always been particularly violent. It provides a valuable case-study of the ways in which the mythology of the 'finer tradition' is created. The second revisits the history of witchcraft, specifically the nature of contemporary resistance to the witch-hunt. It considers the ease with which the assumption of a natural rationalist heroism elides into mythological hagiography.

## NOTES

1. *WiG*, xi.
2. *GiNG*, 12.
3. *Ibid.*, ch. 18; *IdoA*, 18.
4. Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), xii–xvi.
5. *GiNG*, 64–65, 253–270.
6. *Ibid.*, 11.



## The Rational Tradition and Atomism

In the fifth century BC, two Greek philosophers concluded that the world was entirely made up of tiny particles of matter moving through empty space. These particles were of a single pure substance and, if unhindered they moved perpetually through the infinite vacuum. They were the fundamental building blocks of everything in the universe, being indivisible and incapable of being reduced to anything more basic. So they were referred to as *atoms* ('uncuttables'). As they travelled through the void, they collided, temporarily forming aggregates which in turn formed all bodies in the cosmos. All of nature—from the formation of worlds to the origin and functioning of life itself—must be explicable in terms only of the form and behaviour of these miniscule atoms and their aggregates.

Thus the philosophers, Leucippus of Miletus (early fifth century BC) and Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–c. 370 BC), offered an uncompromisingly materialistic vision of the universe that held no place for supernatural. The philosophy, it is argued, was a tenaciously subversive presence in two and a half millennia dominated by supernaturalism and anti-rationalism. Marginalised and 'viciously persecuted as heresy' by the Church (Hitchens), today its truth is universally accepted. The triumph captivates a number of New Atheists and anti-religionist polemicists. Hitchens writes of 'the mighty Democritus' and of the 'brilliant atomist school'; Victor Stenger of the 'brilliant intuition' and the 'remarkable feat of human perception'; whilst for Michel Onfray the atomist revelation was 'a stroke that never ceases to amaze.'<sup>1</sup>

What enthralled New Atheists and anti-religionists is not science, but supposition. As Onfray has it ‘the genius of Leucippus and Democritus led them to discover the atom without possessing the material means to confirm their intuition.’<sup>2</sup> Atomism was thus a work of the mind unaided, an exercise in pure reasoning the very existence of which stands as proof positive of the superior claims of rationalism. Faced with a world that was unknowable, the theist mind intuited stories full of anthropomorphic pretensions and mythical comforts. Faced with the same unknowable world, the rational mind intuited material systems and accepted nature as logic dictated it must be. Scientific advancement eventually opened these rival speculations to empirical testing, and ‘the “philosophical atom” has received the stamp of authenticity’ (Onfray) from microscopes and particle accelerators.<sup>3</sup> The invisible world imagined to exist by theists has eluded every technology.

Safely validated, atomism is projected back as a qualitative test of the philosophical mindsets of the premodern world. Since deductive materialism is taken to epitomise the virtues of rationalism, its rejection must be symptomatic of intellectual failure. Thus, Stenger tells us that Aristotle ‘failed to grasp’ and had ‘no sympathy for atomism’ because it could not be made to conform to his own (‘grossly wrong’) theories of matter and motion.<sup>4</sup> The Stoic philosophers, as pantheists, simply could not accept that all existence is the result of random collisions of dead particles of matter. ‘Scoffing’ at the notion that complexity might arise from chance, they lacked the imagination needed to realise that there are occurrences that are truly without a cause. The Neoplatonists offered similar objections, unable to comprehend that life and intelligence might emerge from nothing more than the aggregations of matter. Stenger clearly believed that the fact such arguments foreshadow those of the modern intelligent design movement stands as an unfortunate testimonial as to their relative quality.<sup>5</sup> ‘In every important respect’, he declares, ‘the atomists were so right and the anti-atomists so wrong.’<sup>6</sup>

Christians, all are agreed, failed the test utterly. For Stenger, early Christians could not tolerate any notion at all of the primacy of matter, and atomism was particularly offensive because it made absurd the notion that there existed a divine plan to work humanity’s salvation. Later Christians found ways to engage with atomism as a theory of mechanics but only by ignoring its theological implications.<sup>7</sup> Hitchens instead condemns Christians for the knowing and cynical suppression of a superior philosophy, for, apparently, they knew that atomism ‘offered

a far better explanation of the natural world than did religion.’<sup>8</sup> Michel Onfray argues several lines at once. He first provides a generic explanation: atomism was pagan and could not be incorporated by a religion determined to find the universe satisfactorily explained in the Bible.<sup>9</sup> But this immediately seems to accord too much logic to Christians with their ‘prodigious abundance of blunders and stupidity.’ For he then suggests that being wrong is simply a pathological condition of the Christian mind. ‘In science’, he declares, ‘the Church has always been wrong about everything: faced with an epistemological truth, it automatically persecutes the discoverer.’<sup>10</sup> But this seems not to go far enough in implying true culpability. Finally, Onfray effectively sidelines his own suggestions and, with Hitchens, depicts the clerical mind as all too capable of appreciating the superiority of atomism, and lashing out precisely because of it.

His example is the challenge offered by atomism to the Eucharist miracle. The Church understood the bread and wine of the sacrament to be transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ, yet to retain their original appearance to the human senses. To explain this it relied on an Aristotelian distinction between qualities of a substance that were *essential* (e.g. flesh, stone, water) and those that were *accidental* (colour, taste, texture and so on). God might miraculously transform the former without affecting the latter. Onfray cannot contain his derision for this ‘farce of an ontological trick.’ The implication is clear: Christians were either desperate to make the best of the sacramental muddle, or were perpetuating belief in a phenomenon they knew to be impossible. Atomism threatened to expose the appalling vulnerability of Eucharistic theology. The bread and wine, it would explain, were formed of atoms. Any transformation in the substance would involve a re-arrangement of the atoms within it, and since atomic arrangement was the mechanism which determined how a substance would appear to the human senses, bread transformed into flesh would appear as flesh. Faced with such a superior account of reality, ‘the Church’s theoretical twaddle’ became impossible to maintain and ‘[t]hat is why the disciples of Democritus had to be destroyed.’<sup>11</sup>

A narrative of atomism, then, emerges in anti-religionist polemic fit for a self-reverential mythology. Not marginal but rarefied, atomism, it tells us, was the preserve of the few most rational until the emergence of genuine science allowed the world to catch up with its subtlety. It was born in the most brilliant and uncompromising reasoning of the ancient

world and kept alive by a handful of men whose very sympathy with the idea testified to their superiority of mind and intellectual courage. A ‘tenuous thread of thought’, Hitchens tells us, that ‘managed to persist in a few learned minds’; for Onfray, the achievement of tenacious and ‘rebellious individuals...who prized the truths of reason over the fables of faith.’<sup>12</sup> When brute religion gave way and men of science were finally in the ascendant, the potential of the intuition could, at last, be fulfilled. Powerful evidence indeed of the superiority of the rational tradition to which the New Atheists and anti-religionists believe they belong.

Except that the narrative relies on anachronism, hindsight and a misleading exaggeration of the prescience of early materialist thinking.

### EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRUTHS AND WEAK MINDS

We have seen that for Onfray, Christians have a fatally flawed relationship with ‘epistemological truths.’ But what should we make of the argument that Leucippus and Democritus intuited a scientific reality?

The prescience of the ancient atomists is widely accepted by modern scholars, but only within certain limits. ‘Democritus’ greatest creation’, professor of physics, Hans Christian von Baeyer, notes, ‘reigns as the sovereign paradigm of physical science.’ For Jonathan Barnes, ‘we are all atomists now; and we are both obliged and delighted to pay homage to the first inventor of that subtle truth.’ Bernard Pullman even declares the atomic hypothesis to be ‘one of the most important gifts ever bestowed by man or heaven.’<sup>13</sup> But none confuses the philosophical atomism of the ancients with its modern physical counterpart. ‘The atom of modern science’, Pullman notes, ‘bears only a vague resemblance to the kind of atom envisioned by these early thinkers’—what Baeyer characterises as the ‘primitive particle’ distinct from the ‘enigmatic cloud of modern physics.’<sup>14</sup> For Alan Chalmers, atomist prescience appears so ‘startling’, and such a ‘conundrum’, only when we overlook the fact that their ‘miniature inert stones’ could not be empirically defended and were ‘incapable of explaining much’, both in stark contrast to the modern counterpart.<sup>15</sup> Onfray, by contrast, argues that ‘the Democritan intuition has been validated’ and the “philosophical atom” has received the stamp of authenticity.’ The first claim has weight only if it is made without the second.

Leucippus and Democritus imagined atoms of an infinite variety of shapes and sizes. Some are round, some concave, some convex, some



smooth, some barbed. As they come together accidentally in the void, their different shapes physically interlock until a stronger force breaks them apart. The differences in shape, size and alignment of atoms in an aggregate account for all the forms and qualities of objects in nature. Real properties of bodies—size, shape, gas, solid and so on—are the result of factors such as the density of atomic aggregation. Secondary qualities are not inherent to the bodies themselves but produced by the impact on the senses of streams of atoms constantly flowing from all objects, whose shape and arrangement correspond to the aggregate that emits them. Thus, the perception of the colour white is produced by smooth atoms that are ‘shadowless and shining’, black by rough and uneven atoms that ‘cast shadows.’ Sweet tastes are produced by moderately sized round atoms which ‘flow through and permeate the entire body, but not violently or quickly’, whereas bitterness comes from ‘small, smooth, round atoms with spikes on the circumference as well; that is why it is sticky and viscous.’<sup>16</sup>

Worlds (of which there were assumed to be many) form as massive aggregations of atoms driven together by their assimilation into a cosmic whirl. As they spin in the vortex, atoms of a similar size are brought together. The increased congestion in the whirl squeezes the smaller atoms back out into the void, leaving the larger to coalesce into a spherical body, but one still comprised of moving atoms separated by intervals of empty space. The movement of the whirl becomes weaker towards the centre of the sphere, where larger atoms and aggregates are ultimately able to resist the rotation and coalesce further into an ‘earth.’<sup>17</sup> The basis of life itself was also taken to be atomic. Human bodies, for example, were believed to be infused throughout with especially fine soul-atoms, spherical in shape because these most easily permeate an aggregate and move other atoms. The agitation of soul-atoms produces sensation and consciousness, and so consciousness is distributed throughout the body. The motion of these atoms within the flesh, in turn, causes bodily movement. If atomic aggregation accounts for generation and growth, disaggregation results in death and decay. To die is to lose sufficient soul-atoms to maintain a functioning consciousness. Aristotle reported that the atomists believed that the soul-atoms are continuously in danger of being squeezed out of the body by the matter that surrounds them. Respiration then serves to arrest this loss of the soul, air containing soul-atoms that are breathed in, preventing the loss of so many soul-atoms as to cause death.<sup>18</sup>

Some of these speculations will appear to bear an intriguing resemblance to what modern scientists have discovered. Others are distinctly alien. But which are so accurate that we ought to accord them the status of an ‘epistemological truth’ and so use them as a barometer of the intellectual strength or otherwise of our ancestors? If any, at what point were they so clearly established that to doubt them became indicative of either a weak intellect or wilful perversity? Were those Christians who denied atomism in the Middle Ages or in the seventeenth century really committing the same intellectual offence as those who did so in the twentieth? Here Onfray’s argument simply falls again into self-contradiction. The prescience of the early atomists is ‘amazing’ because they intuited a material reality far beyond the ability of the human senses to test. The ‘genius’ of the atomists lay in what they could imagine even when they could not *know*. Yet Christians of all eras are apparently to be condemned, not simply for disagreeing with materialism, but for resisting an ‘epistemological [i.e. known] truth.’ For Onfray, the truth-status of historical atomism changes with the needs of his polemic. It softens when the aim is to celebrate the imagination of early rationalist materialism, but hardens again when convenient to caricature Christian resistance as blind prejudice.

Most modern writers feel obliged to point out the existence of a conceptual gulf between Greek atomism and its modern counterpart. To Leucippus and Democritus the notion of a sub-atomic world was a contradiction in terms—atoms were, by definition, uncuttable. ‘If there is any one thing’, Paul Cartledge notes, ‘that marks the crucial *discontinuity* between the ancient Greek enquiry into nature and modern scientific theory and practice, it is the splitting of the atom...and the discovery through experiment of subatomic particles.’<sup>19</sup> As the philosopher of science, Meinhard Kuhlmann, notes in his recent study on the ontology of matter,

As we see it today atoms are actually divisible and what takes their place as the smallest building blocks (maybe quarks and leptons, maybe superstrings) are not eternal entities. They can undergo change themselves and can even begin and cease to exist.<sup>20</sup>

He concludes that ‘if one takes atomism to be the view that the material world consists of unchangeable atoms (whatever they are) on the one hand and void on the other hand then one has to conclude that modern

physics actually arrived at a non-atomistic point of view.' For Alan Chalmers, modern atomism must be considered an outright 'violation' of its ancient counterpart.<sup>21</sup>

### FILLING IN THE DETAILS

For Victor Stenger such claims are to be treated with caution. They can, he argues, contribute to an unfortunate popular misconception that modern physics has somehow done away with matter, which in turn allows believers to pretend that the weirdness of the quantum world is revealing forms of immaterial existence. Quantum physics, Stenger insists, still deals with particles, even if our understanding of what a particle is is profoundly different to that of the ancients. And whichever particles turn out to be truly elementary, they will still be the building blocks of our universe, which must be understood as 'reducible to discrete, separated parts.' Nothing has yet been discovered to challenge the ancients' conclusion that atomism must imply an atheist and anti-teleological understanding of nature. In this sense, if Leucippus and Democritus were mistaken in their identification of what was truly an atom, 'they pretty much had it right, at least in general terms. The job of science since has been to fill in the details.' For Stenger, all of the discoveries of particle physics must be considered, not only the 'successes' and 'achievements' of atomism, but its 'triumphs' and 'victories.'<sup>22</sup>

Yet the notion of 'filling in the details' flattens out historical difference as being unworthy of real attention. Those parts of ancient atomism that appear familiar to us are celebrated as prescient fundamentals. The remainder are relegated to the status of the theory's disposable ephemera—'details' to be exchanged for the correct ones and barely even needing to be acknowledged. But when an ancient philosophy is described only in terms of what it got right, it will appear to have been uncommonly right. And when that philosophy is taken to exemplify a certain perennial mindset, that mindset will appear uncommonly insightful.

Let us consider only the example over which Stenger is most assertive, presumably because it has the most potential impact for the God debate.<sup>23</sup> This is his claim that atomism 'anticipated Darwinian evolution.'<sup>24</sup> The Roman atomist, Lucretius, in *De Rerum Natura* (c. 50 BC) described the way in which the random aggregation of atoms produced life through a process of natural selection:

Lucretius talks about how in the beginning, there were many freaks with various deformities that made them unable to reproduce or forage for food and their species died off. You will get objections from some scholars that this was not really evolution, so I will provide the following excerpt:

Many kinds of creatures must have vanished with no trace  
 Because they could not reproduce or hammer out their race.  
 For any beast you look upon that drinks life-giving air,  
 Has either wits, or bravery, or fleetness of foot to spare,  
 Ensuring its survival from its genesis to now. (5.855–59)<sup>25</sup>

The attractiveness of an atomist theory of evolution for New Atheist polemic is obvious. The scientific validation of Darwinism is taken to be the point at which the notion of an interventionist creator god finally lost any respectability. Entirely natural processes could at last account for the appearance of complex lifeforms, so Darwinism became the *bête noire* of creationists and a conclusive intellectual test against which they could be found wanting. Imagine, then, the satisfaction of being able to show that the same triumph was to be found on both sides of the long scientific interregnum tragically forced upon the West by the rise of Christianity.

But Stenger's 'some scholars' are correct: Lucretius was not describing evolution. Chance, he claimed, must form creatures of every possible kind, even some without limbs, some without eyes or mouths, some without genitals. These 'monsters' would naturally lose the primal battle for survival.<sup>26</sup> But Lucretius' animals were formed, not by the slow incremental development of complexity from a microbial beginning, but by the *spontaneous generation* of fully formed creatures. The random aggregation of atoms, he claimed, formed the seeds of animals which gestated in rooted wombs in the ground. Once born, these primordial beings were sustained directly by the earth, which exuded a milk-like substance.<sup>27</sup> Sexual reproduction overtook spontaneous generation as the earth lost its fecundity 'like a woman wasted with long years.'<sup>28</sup> In a further stark contrast to Darwinian evolution, atomism also led Lucretius to argue for the absolute fixity of species. Lucretius believed that the range of possible combinations of differently shaped atoms was not limitless. Were it to be so, hybrid species would certainly be formed, and yet they were not. Instead, the young of any species inherit its distinctive atomic

combination, 'And every breed by Nature's settled covenant maintains / Its individual traits.'<sup>29</sup>

One species, however, was described by Lucretius as having undergone a process of evolution. The first men and women he described as essentially bestial.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as they discovered means to clothe and house themselves, and discovered the use of fire, they began to change. No longer subject to the same harsh and precarious existence, they softened physically, losing their strength, their speed and their resilience. As they did so they became ever more dependent on artificial protections and comforts, and so were thrown into forms of communal living that in turn produced even more significant changes. Humans mellowed psychologically, developing cooperation and familial sensibilities for the first time. Through the gradual refinement of humans, the eventual development of language, technology, urban society and economy was made possible.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, as the classicist, Gordon Campbell, points out in his highly detailed study, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution* (2003), even here there is a clear conceptual separation from Darwinian evolution. Again the fixity of species is clear, and Lucretius' evolution bears a much greater resemblance to that of Lamarck than Darwin. Human refinement is not taken to have occurred through the inheritance of random mutations, and extinction played no role in the process. Rather, Lucretius' humans evolved through the inheritance of acquired characteristics that were themselves developed in response to environmental change. For these reasons, Campbell maintains, to regard Lucretius as forerunner of Darwin is a mistake. Darwinism has so permeated our sense of evolution that it provokes hindsight and distorts our view of earlier theories. Lucretius, Campbell concludes, can only be properly understood once he is no longer viewed through a 'Darwinian filter.'<sup>32</sup>

None of this detracts from the proper historical importance of ancient atomism or the power of its primary insight, but we do well to bear it in mind if only to keep the claimed superiority of deductive rationalism in perspective. Any debate using modern science to judge the merits or limitations of Greek atomism is, of course, a contest of anachronisms. Yet it is forced upon us by the tendency among these writers to overstate the philosophy's prescience. Whatever the sins committed against it by the Church, the rejection of atomism as an 'epistemological truth' cannot be alleged before at least the end of the nineteenth century when scepticism over the issue was finally confined to a few dichards. Before then

atomism must be viewed historically—that is, as a theory born in, shaped by and even rejected in its context.

### GREEK ATOMISM IN CONTEXT

‘The Greeks thought a great deal about matter and proposed so many different hypotheses about its nature that at least one of them was likely to be right.’<sup>33</sup> The professor of Chemistry and militant atheist, Peter Atkins, is perhaps being flippant, but a serious historical point is implied. As remarkable as the intuition of Leucippus and Democritus was, the extent to which it was scientifically correct—its identification of the microscopic basis of matter—was purely a matter of happenstance. Atomism was conceived within the parameters of Greek philosophy, not empirical science. It was one of a number of speculative descriptions of nature that sought to understand the elemental basis of the observable universe—to identify the primordial substances from which all things are formed and to which they resolve again upon destruction. Thales of Miletus (*fl.* 585 BC), the ‘father’ of philosophy, deduced that the single element from which all was made was water. It was ubiquitous and held a special place in the nurture of all living things. Anaximander (*fl.* 550 BC) proposed the existence of an obscure principle, *apeiron* (‘boundless’), which could not be related to any known substance, but which drove all formation and change. Anaximenes (*fl.* 535 BC) favoured air, the nature of substance being defined by the density of its compression. Heraclitus of Ephesus (*fl.* 500 BC) offered fire as his candidate, its liquefaction and solidification producing water and stone. Empedocles of Acragas (*fl.* 450 BC), suggested the multiple elements that would come to dominate Aristotelian and medieval science: fire, air, earth and water. The apparent separation between these failed imaginative speculations and ‘insightful’ atomism is an illusion of hindsight. None of these suggestions were fanciful. All were based in a combination of observation and deduction in which patterns in nature were sought and extrapolated from. The ancient theories of matter represented points in a development of cosmological thinking of which atomism was an extension rather than a departure. It was not the product of a sudden brilliant cascade of materialist reasoning but an attempt to address an idiosyncratic problem within early Greek philosophy.

The naturalistic departure of the early Greek philosophers should not be underestimated. The professor of ancient philosophy, Keimpe Alegria,

notes that it is important to understand the difference in context that separated religious speculations, such as those of Hesiod, from the more reductive investigations of the Milesian philosophers and their successors. Origin myths were constructed as elaborations on tradition, often to be recited at social or ritual functions. Their purpose was to connect an existing range of gods with the origin of the cosmos, and so they projected them back, finding a place in the narrative for each of the pantheon. They multiplied the range of factors and personalities at work in the formation of the cosmos. By contrast, Alegra notes, early Greek philosophy had no ritual context and no need to consolidate existing belief. 'Free to speculate', its practitioners could conceive of a radically reduced number of primordial factors and substances.<sup>34</sup>

Yet even these speculations could hardly be free from the influence of preconception. The earliest of the Greek cosmologists were monists. They believed that there existed a single substance out of which the cosmos was made. Cyril Bailey, notes that 'a feeling perhaps rather than a reasoned conclusion' suggested to them that unity and permanence must lie behind the variety and changeableness of the world, and even that the origins of this sense were 'doubtless religious.'<sup>35</sup> The dogmatic potential of monism was revealed by Parmenides of Elea (c. 515 BC) who claimed that, despite the evidence from the physical senses, all variation, change, movement, birth and death, are simply illusions disguising a world which is a single *plenum* of matter. Only what exists, exists. Something is or it is not, yet non-being cannot be considered a state of existence and so Parmenides denied its reality. But change would require that non-being be real; that is, it implies the coming to be of something that previously was not or the ceasing to be of something that was. If non-existence cannot be real, change cannot really occur. Empty space not filled with matter does not exist, and existence is *only* matter, unchanging and eternal, homogenous and indivisible. So the apparent separation of things from one another is also illusory. Parmenides took monism to its logical conclusion, refusing to compromise its principle by giving credence to the appearance of variety, movement and change.<sup>36</sup>

Few could accept the extremity of his idea, and pluralism developed as a response to the perceived failure of monism, in general, to account for change and variation. If not in one primordial substance, did the answer lie in the mixing of two or more? Pluralism might have abandoned the absolute simplicity demanded by monism, but, in the thinking of Empedocles at least, its prejudice was still towards efficiency in

primordial substances. With his pluralism developed the concept of elements—that there exists a small number of unchangeable substances of which everything else is a compound. Empedocles amalgamated the various primary substances of the monists into a system of elements that, mixed together in different ratios, accounted for the complex variety perceived in the world. The true departure from the quasi-religious instinct to unify, or at best rationalise, the component parts of matter, came from Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500–428 BC) who took pluralism to its logical extreme. Rather than attempting to explain how an elemental simplicity persisted behind the appearance of change and variation, he accepted the veracity of that appearance and posited the existence of unlimited forms of matter corresponding to all observed variety. Thus, bones are made of tiny ‘seeds’ of bone-matter, gold is made of seeds of gold-matter and fire of seeds of fire-matter.

This was the context for the development of atomism. Brilliant the insight of Leucippus may have been, but it was not unprompted. Rather, it was self-consciously an attempt to reconcile the traditions of monism and pluralism. A single primordial form of matter does indeed exist, Leucippus reasoned, of which all things are made. As with the monism of Parmenides, all existence is understood as ‘an absolute corporeal *plenum*, sheer matter and nothing else’,<sup>37</sup> indivisible, eternal and, of itself, unchangeable. But crucially the impossibility of non-being was rejected. The existence of a void allowed that portions of matter could be separated, be in motion and interact. The atomist *plenum*, then, is not a single entity, but an infinite multitude of pieces of the single substance, whose different shapes and sizes account for variety, and whose aggregation and disaggregation account for change. Leucippus had satisfied the (perhaps quasi-religious) intellectual instinct that demanded an ultimate unity to the cosmos. But he had also respected the evidence of the senses which impressed so forcefully upon the observer the reality of multiplicity.<sup>38</sup>

The rather obvious point, that atomism was wholly a product of its time and context, implies a further challenge to the New Atheist tendency to see it as an early epitome of the rational tradition’s perennial superiority. Atomism was not frivolously rejected by those incapable of appreciating its brilliance. It was seriously critiqued by those who understood it in its own terms and who understood the tradition from which it emerged.



Consider Stenger's attack on Aristotle. Aristotle, he notes, rejected the void essentially because he found it incompatible with his own ideas of motion. He believed that only two forms of motion exist: natural and forced. The four elements each have an innate tendency to move towards their natural place; fire and air move upwards, earth and water downwards. They might be forced in other directions but will return to their natural paths once no longer diverted. Thus, for Aristotle, movement in the void was impossible. Since the void is infinite, there can be no up, down or middle within it, and so natural motion cannot occur—as Stenger has it, an object 'would not know where to go.' Further, since an isolated object in the void can have no forces acting upon it, forced motion will also not occur. Atoms in the void simply would not move, and so none of the interactions upon which the formation of worlds depends could occur.

For Stenger, Aristotle's criticisms are hardly to be taken seriously, because he was simply wrong. His theory of motion was 'grossly wrong, whereby "grossly wrong" I mean totally inconsistent with observations.' Moreover, Aristotle 'failed to grasp the principle of inertia' which would have allowed him to understand how a body can move without the impetus of some exterior force. Through the influence of Aristotelianism in antiquity, and through its ultimate institutionalisation as dogma by the Catholic Church, science was held back for millennia.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Stenger's arguments remove the debate from its historical context in order that Aristotle might be found wanting and the perennial superiority of atomism made axiomatic. What are the observations to which he refers? They cannot be those of the Greeks. Natural motion was entirely compatible with the observation of nature available at the time: fire always moves upwards, water never does; a stone must be lifted from the ground and, when released, it will fall (descend again). As Andrew Pyle notes in his comprehensive study of atomism, natural motion seemed to Aristotle 'merely a generalisation and systematisation of common sense experience', experience that the random and non-natural motion of atoms could not explain.<sup>40</sup>

And what, historically, does it mean to say that Aristotle 'failed to grasp the principle of inertia'? The issue is somewhat contested, but numerous scholars would suggest that the atomists did not grasp it either. They explained the motion of atoms in the void only in terms of their collisions with other atoms. Indeed, Pyle argues that Aristotle *accused* atomism of implying a principle of inertia and that he did so as

a *reductio ad absurdum* of its theories. Experience appears to dictate that non-natural motion requires a sustaining impulse without which the body moved will come to rest (as in the flight of an arrow). Was there a form of non-natural motion that did not rely on a sustaining impulse, the body, in a uniform and resistanceless void, would move *ad infinitum*. Whilst absurd to Aristotle, and presumably unacceptable to Democritus, Pyle argues that ancient atomism could have incorporated such a notion: ‘the law of inertia may then have been implicit in Democritean Atomism, in the weak sense that a plausible derivation of it can be made from the basic principles of that theory.’ But it is what atomists ‘*should* have said’, not what they did say. There is, he argues, ‘no indication that [Democritus] was in possession of a theory of dynamics far in advance of those of his contemporaries.’<sup>41</sup> In response to Aristotle’s criticisms, it fell to Epicurus (341–270 BC), not to explain how atoms moved without natural motion, but instead to assign a natural motion to them in a ‘very curious and idiosyncratic theory.’ He added weight to their assumed properties in order to account for their movement before collision, which was now taken to be perpetually downward in parallel until at random they ‘swerve’ slightly from their paths and so collide with other atoms.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, the rejection of the atomist emphasis on chance and purposeless creation—which Stenger sees as a precursor to the weak-mindedness of ‘modern theological arguments’<sup>43</sup>—occurred not through a lack of intellectual daring, but because it again failed to explain what could so clearly be seen. Pyle identifies two areas as representative of the weakness of atomist anti-teleology. The night sky revealed a timeless, unchanging order in the heavenly bodies and their movements. To believe such a system could be formed by the random collisions of atoms appeared a perverse rejection of the obvious conclusion that order implied design.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the teleological approach to biology, Pyle argues, was far more sophisticated and far more successful than the atomists’ own ‘horribly crude’ version of natural selection. The atomists rejected the notion that the emergence of complex biological structures could be explained by considering their function. Eyes were not made *for* seeing, or teeth *for* biting, but, once accidentally formed, body parts found the use to which they were best suited.<sup>45</sup> Again, this tempts us to regard the atomists as possessed of an exceptionally powerful pre-Darwinian insight. But the problem of atomism’s ‘wildly improbable’ mechanics of spontaneous generation remained, and, as importantly, attempting to discern

what a biological structure was *for* proved far more fruitful as an early method of investigating the workings of plants and animals. Paling next to the success of its rivals, it was, Pyle argues, ‘small wonder that biology was considered a massive lacuna in the natural philosophy of ancient atomism.’<sup>46</sup>

A too selective ‘filling in of the details’, then, allows atheists to idealise early materialism as a false start in the race to our twenty-first century reality, abruptly halted by teleologist prejudice and the Christian adoption of Aristotle. Looking back across the intellectual chasm of the religious ‘Dark Ages’, they can see themselves in the best of those on the other side. But to attach a sense of mutual belonging to a superior intellectual tradition to the convenience of ‘details’ is to open Pandora’s Box. What if, beyond its broadest premise and what it would gratify us to believe, the nuances of this product of early rationalism are deeply alien to us?

To take only one example. The experience of consciousness and sentience suggested to Democritus that the soul exists, but deductive reasoning taught him that it must be an entirely material entity residing in the body. Thus far, few modern atheists would have difficulty identifying with the philosopher’s attempt to locate experience in the physical, however factually inaccurate it may have been. But the more deeply we examine his view of the material soul, the more remote from us Democritus’ thinking reveals itself to be. For the existence of soul-atoms seems to have suggested to him both that bodies emit atomic simulacra that are alive, and that dead bodies continue to feel.

All bodies, the atomists believed, discharge films of atoms, or *eidōla*. Since the spherical soul-atoms permeate the body even to the level of the skin (accounting for the sensations experienced through touch), it must follow that the *eidōla* emitted by a living creature contain soul-atoms.<sup>47</sup> And since no specific conditions (other than their presence in the body) triggers their sensitive and cognitive functioning, it must be assumed that soul-atoms operate in the same way within an *eidōla*. The *eidōla* itself, therefore, must be alive. Evidence suggests that Democritus believed that in dreams stray *eidōla* interact with the sleeping mind.<sup>48</sup> The gods, he argued, were *eidōla* of enormous size, alive, intelligent and regularly intervening in human affairs.<sup>49</sup> As to sensate corpses, Christopher Taylor points out that Democritus did not privilege any specific area as a locus for processing of sensations produced by soul-atoms: wherever there were soul-atoms, there was feeling.<sup>50</sup> Death was caused by the loss, not

of all soul-atoms, but of sufficient to maintain a functioning consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Logic dictated, then, that Democritus believe those soul-atoms remaining in the body will continue to perform their sensitive function. Corpses, whilst beyond sentience and movement, *must* continue to feel.<sup>52</sup> Taylor notes that there is evidence that Democritus obeyed the logic,<sup>53</sup> and that, the claim associated with the atomists—with which the New Atheists again find fellowship—that death is nothing and so not to be feared, could not inhere in Democritean materialism.<sup>54</sup>

New Atheists and anti-religionists will no doubt object to any emphasis on the (to us) strange rationalism of Democritus with his world of living *eidōla* and sensate corpses. What matters, they will say, is the commitment to understand the world in materialist terms. If these were faltering steps, they were steps in the right direction, and the atomists would have been capable of revising their views in the face of stronger evidence or reasoning. Yet it is they themselves who argue that the products of a particular philosophy do matter, and who seek to impose on the past modern, and entirely inappropriate, definitions of credulity as the means by which the mindsets of our forebears might be judged. Ancient theists thought that they were affected by unseen, sentient beings because they believed in the existence of a wide range of supernatural powers. Atomists, at least of the Democritean stamp, thought that they were affected by unseen, sentient beings because they believed the random aggregation of atoms produced such things. Both positions were predicated on an acceptance that common human experiences were attributable to the influence of external forces that, whatever their origin, were alive and were endowed with intelligence. Atheists are likely to sympathise far more with the approach that explicitly attempted to keep such phenomena within the realm of the natural, but we should recognise the relativism involved in doing so. For we risk defining thereby acceptable and unacceptable routes to the same ontological error. We are in danger of excusing in the results of atomism what we would condemn in the results of theism, and that simply because we are in sympathy with the intentions of the materialist philosophers.

But, if ancient atomism was more complex than New Atheist and anti-religionist polemic would suggest, and must be more cautiously employed when discussing the ‘rational tradition’, that fact itself does not invalidate the claim that the philosophy, and the rationalist mindset it exemplified, were inimical to the Christian Church and ‘viciously

persecuted.' May not the rejection of atomism still reveal a perennial weakness of the religious, and particularly the clerical mind?

### NIGHTMARES OF THE CHRISTIAN MIND

Michel Onfray provides three examples of courageous atomists persecuted by the Church. In 1340 Nicholas d'Autrecourt, a lawyer and theology student at the Sorbonne, was summoned to the papal court at Avignon to answer charges of false teaching. He had advanced a particulate theory of light which was 'bad news for the believers in the Aristotelian metaphysical soup!' He was condemned and his writings burned.<sup>55</sup> On the 17th February 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in the Campo de' Fiori in Rome, his tongue clamped to prevent his dangerous words infecting those who came to watch him die. This Dominican friar was no atheist, but still he died 'for materialism.' He had suggested that atoms were the 'many centers of life, places where the spirit manifests itself as coeternal with God.' Such religious atomism was too much for the Church. Finally, the famous events in the Vatican in June 1633 were the great twist in the story of atomism. Galileo, 'the emblematic representative of the Church's hatred for science', was condemned because he espoused an atomic theory of matter which threatened the doctrine of transubstantiation. So serious was this offence that Galileo agreed to plead guilty to the lesser crime of Copernicanism simply to escape Bruno's fate.<sup>56</sup>

Thus Onfray puts some flesh on the bones of the notion of the Church's unflinching belligerence towards atomism. Ever vigilant, it 'strikes' at every 'hint' of materialism, its violence driven, he tells us, by a quite literal hatred of matter itself. Why should this be? '[B]ecause', Onfray notes, 'belief in the existence of matter, to the exclusion of every other reality, leads logically to the assertion of the existence of a material God.' Hence the sheer intolerability of atomism to the Christian mind. Victor Stenger tells a similar story. Atomism has 'from the beginning... been an anathema to religious belief.'<sup>57</sup> It was conceived with a sideways glance at Socrates' cup of hemlock, and so paid 'lip service' to the gods.<sup>58</sup> But the medieval Church rejected outright the primacy of matter and suppressed 'any scintilla of freethinking.' Only after the Renaissance and the Reformation had sufficiently undermined its authority could atomism begin to advance again. As before, the new generations of atomists worked under the influence of a stark warning—this time the

image of Bruno burning in the Campo de' Fiori.<sup>59</sup> But beneath all this lay a truth that made any real accommodation of Christianity and atomism impossible: 'Atomism is atheism.'<sup>60</sup>

We should note, however, how deliberately Onfray and Stenger have ring-fenced their arguments around 'belief in the existence of matter, *to the exclusion of every other reality*.' In taking this as if it were definitive of atomism per se, they imply that any other version should not be considered truly atomist. Yet, the materialist potential of atomism resides not in the intuition that the physical world is made up of microscopic particles of matter, but in the claim that nothing else exists and that these particles are unguided in their movement and interaction. In making these elaborations inalienable from 'true' atomism, Onfray and Stenger confine an entire philosophy to the terms of its initial articulation, disallowing for its development and reshaping over time and changing context. This rigidity of definition is unhistorical. The long-term permutations of atomist thought were many and varied—and they included a number of forms of religious atomism. Materialism has never been the only, or even the most common result of contemplating the nature of matter, and it was not the inescapable conclusion of thinking seriously about atoms.

### CHRISTIANITY AND THE REVIVAL OF ATOMISM

Whilst medieval scholars were well aware of Greek atomism, no serious engagement with it occurred before the fourteenth century when a number of philosophers proposed systems of physical indivisibility.<sup>61</sup> As with so many aspects of classical culture, the Renaissance saw an expansion of interest in atomism through the rediscovery and printing of sympathetic texts. Atomism provided useful points of reference (for instance, for Copernicus) and suggested answers to specific problems such as the mechanics of contagion.<sup>62</sup> But it was not until the late sixteenth century, with Giordano Bruno's theories (1580s) and with Nicholas Hill's *Philosophia Epicurea* (1601), that new fully atomic cosmologies were attempted.<sup>63</sup>

Early modern atomism was so eclectic that historians have difficulty in framing it as a discrete category of contemporary investigation, and it certainly was not a movement. The atomic theories proposed by Bruno, by Hill, by the English astronomer and mathematician, Thomas Harriot (1606), by Francis Bacon (1606–1620), by the German physician, Daniel Sennert (1618), by the French physician, Sebastian Basso

(1621), by Galileo (1622), or by the French philosopher, Claude Berigard (1643), were highly individualised. If the names of Democritus, Lucretius or Epicurus were often appealed to, as much of their philosophy—the void, the infinite variety of atomic size and shape, the spontaneous ‘swerve’—was abandoned as was taken up.<sup>64</sup> It would also be a mistake to assume that atomism was always gratefully embraced as part of a wholesale rejection of Aristotelianism. Its earliest revivers certainly questioned traditional doctrines of matter, but tended to do so by pulling atomism *into* a broader peripatetic natural philosophy.<sup>65</sup> Daniel Sennert, for example, proposed that atoms were the minimal particles of the four Aristotelian elements, and similar theories were advanced by Sebastian Basso and by the German mathematician, Joachim Jungius (1587–1657).<sup>66</sup>

Without doubt atomism’s atheist connotations continued to make it widely disreputable. A number of its ancient tenets were indeed simply antithetical to the Christianity. It offended against the notion of divine will and providence. A world formed by chance in an atomic swirl could hardly accord to the teleological view of nature in which God’s purpose was taken to be manifest. The claim that atoms were eternal and uncreated opposed the belief that God had fashioned all things *ex nihilo*. In its insistence on complete human corporeality, atomism was offensive to the concept of humans as partly spiritual beings who would survive the death of the body. The resurrection of Christ, the expectation of human resurrection, and the central Christian promise of salvation were thus absolutely incompatible with the ideas of Democritus and Epicurus.<sup>67</sup>

Atomism, then, had to be cleansed of these implications. The first, and most influential attempt at a wholesale Christian rehabilitation of atomism was carried out by the French Catholic priest, Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), who, in the words of his historian, Margaret Osler, attempted to ‘baptise Epicureanism’. He was the first of the revivers to reject outright the Aristotelian system, but he did so by introducing teleology into atomism in an explicit repudiation of Epicurus’ intentions. Thus, for Gassendi, atoms are not uncreated, or random in their movements, but are the building blocks of God’s cosmos, their interactions the determinants of His natural order. But if God works through matter, matter is not all there is. So Gassendi accepted a corporeality to the soul, but argued that it is made up of two parts: the irrational, sensate part and the reasoning mind. The first is material, comprised of atoms and sparked into life by the physical process of generation. The second

is incorporeal, created and infused into the body directly by God. The soul-atoms, then, are both sensate in themselves and are the medium by which reason is joined to the body.<sup>68</sup> In the end, Osler notes, Gassendi had stripped out so much that it is debatable whether what was left could strictly be called Epicureanism. But it was a fully Christian atomism and it would be followed by others.

New Atheists would hardly be discomforted by any of this. Does not the fact that atomism had to be eased through the gateway of Aristotelian and Christian comprehensibility (in order to finally realise that it only eroded those supposed truths) merely confirm the damage wrought upon the collective intellect by the Church's long supremacy? There is nothing here, they might conclude, to suggest that the history of the struggle between rationalism and faith is in need even of qualification.

Stenger, in fact, barely troubles with the question. During the Scientific Revolution, he tells us, developed a Christian response to atomism that continues to be standard today: theists accepted the physics and simply rejected the materialism, either out of religious habit or because they did not want to share Bruno's fate.<sup>69</sup> In Stenger's account, what these scientists actually said concerning religious atomism is hardly worthy of notice. Thus he assures us that Gassendi, '*although*' a priest, was a true scientist who observed, measured and calculated. Two-thirds of the discussion is given over to displaying this before we get to his contribution to atomism. The significant conflict for Gassendi, it appears, was not over materialism but over how he could square his acceptance of atoms with the fact that they could not be seen. The issue of faith merits only half a sentence: 'the priest Gassendi still asserted that [atoms] were put there by God.' In other words, the clergyman found God's hand in the atomic universe, not because he had any good reason to, but simply because a clergyman would.<sup>70</sup>

The Christian culture of early modern Europe did indeed shape the response to the rediscovery of ancient atomism. But religious concerns were far from one-dimensional. No doubt the very idea of atheism could scandalise, but, as Onfray simply does not acknowledge, and as Stenger acknowledges but does not credit, it was rejected during the Scientific Revolution because it once again appeared to be a deeply flawed interpretation of the natural world. Many of the revivers discounted atomistic atheism, not because they could not comprehend it or because it terrified them, but because they believed it was philosophically weak. Materialism



stretched credibility; its rejection was an attempt to make atomism, not only theologically, but also intellectually respectable.

To the Christian revivers, the insistence on chance again appeared to be a betrayal of the senses.<sup>71</sup> There was, in Robert Boyle's words, 'an insuperable difficulty to conceive how a confused rabble of Atoms could casually jumble themselves at the beginning into so beautiful, orderly, & curious a Frame as the World is.'<sup>72</sup> 'It is unphilosophical', Newton declared, 'to pretend that it might arise out of a chaos by the mere laws of nature.'<sup>73</sup> The idea of the unguided spontaneous generation of animals continued to seem absurd.<sup>74</sup> Boyle considered it 'utterly improbable' that brute and unguided matter should coalesce into functioning animal bodies so precisely fitted to their environments. And how could 'the despicablest Atom' produce sentience and abstract thought?<sup>75</sup>

The hackles of New Atheists will immediately rise. These are forms of argument we now know as 'intelligent design', and they are regarded as notoriously poor by modern atheists.<sup>76</sup> The perception of a designer, it is argued, is a prejudiced response to complexity, not an insight into it. The tendency, Richard Dawkins notes, is to conflate improbability with impossibility and, ignoring particularly the gradual, random steps by which biological organisms have become progressively more complex, to assume that complexity itself must be evidence of the intention of a creator.<sup>77</sup> However, the New Atheists' confidence in the reality of unguided complexity is, as Dawkins accepts, bequeathed to them by the success of Darwin's model of natural selection.<sup>78</sup> In *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins expresses a genuine sympathy with William Paley's awestruck theistic response to the appearance of design in complex organisms, even though it was 'gloriously and utterly wrong.' Such is the wonder of the organic machinery of life that he notes: 'I could not imagine being an atheist before 1859.' As evidence for God, the argument from design might be rejected, but the appearance of design in complex organisms would remain as a conundrum, and the rejection of a creator, 'though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied.' Darwin, at last, provided the explanation and made 'intellectually fulfilled' atheism a possibility.<sup>79</sup>

This level of reflective empathy with the pre-Darwinian theistic instinct is all too often lacking in the historical forays of the New Atheists. Too often they are preconditioned to see atheism as the most satisfying response to the world in every context and so to claim for their own tradition the monopoly of doubt. But, as the example of atomism

eloquently attests, doubt might rationally be applied to an atheist philosophy that appeared so blatantly to disregard the evidence of the senses without explaining why they ought to be distrusted.<sup>80</sup>

The denial of God could appear gratuitous, dogmatic and ultimately self-defeating. Robert Boyle, for example, concluded that the atheist atomist does not successfully do away with God so much as transfer His attributes to atoms themselves. Their qualities are not merely as incomprehensible as those of God, they are the same: self-existence, eternity and self-motion. 'The Epicurean', Boyle declared, 'makes his Atoms so many little gods', and so it came down to a basic choice of preference. Either these incomprehensible qualities reside in God or they reside in matter, but believers and non-believers must both agree that they reside somewhere. For Boyle it was simply more plausible to accept that they inhere in a single sentient being than in each of a vast multitude of insensible atoms.<sup>81</sup> Epicurean theory could also not explain why atoms swerve at random to begin the process of aggregation through collision. Nor could it reveal why, having established that downward motion is simply part of what an atom *is*, this essential quality is lost (in interlocking or rebounding) when an atom collides with another body.<sup>82</sup> The objections raised against classical atomism were serious and ones for which it had no answer. Revivers could believe that by finding God's guiding hand in atomic interaction they were rescuing the philosophy from its own dogmatic excesses. In doing so they often expressed a conviction, not simply that atomism could be made compatible with a belief in God, but that, correctly understood, it offered proof of His existence.<sup>83</sup> Thus (to give only one example), Newton concluded that indivisibility itself was evidence of providence, 'no ordinary power being able to divide what God himself made one in the first creation.' If atoms could be broken or worn away, the nature of the substances they formed would change. Thus hardness was best understood, not as accidental to atoms, but as an ordained quality by which God ensured continuity in the physical world ('that nature may be lasting').<sup>84</sup>

The foregoing only scrapes the very surface of the seventeenth-century investigation of atomism, an area of enormous complexity. It no way reflects the diversity, subtlety and nuance with which debates over matter in general, and atomism in particular, were framed. Nor should we doubt that atomism remained a highly controversial philosophy, or that there were atomists, such as Thomas Hobbes and Margaret Cavendish, who felt no need to find divine providence in the interactions of matter.<sup>85</sup> But it

does illustrate the potential for an engagement with atomism on the part of Christians that, whatever their prejudices, was rational, informed, and in many of its criticisms, effective within the context of scientific knowledge at the time. The history of atomism in the Scientific Revolution reveals a potential within Christianity that should not be there at all if Onfray's assertions are correct.

The New Atheists experience great difficulty in taking the religion of historical scientists seriously, their preference being to dismiss it as cultural convention in the age of Christian totalitarianism. 'Newton did indeed *claim* to be religious', Dawkins tells us, 'So did almost everybody until – significantly I think – the nineteenth century when there was less social and judicial pressure than in earlier centuries to profess religion.'<sup>86</sup> A. C. Grayling manages to discuss both Copernicus and Galileo as prime agents in the 'freeing of the mind' whilst all but ignoring the religion of either.<sup>87</sup> The prejudice allows for science to be foregrounded in the characterisation of early modern virtuosi whilst faith is safely relegated as an incidental factor. They become examples of a certain type of scientist: striving to negotiate a Christian culture that, even if they themselves were unaware of the fact, was intrinsically hostile to their aims. Their work is contextualised (perhaps even judged) in terms of the extent of their culturally induced declension from an atheist ideal. But properly contextualised and understood, the Christianity of these scientists cannot be downplayed. The claim that science might reveal the agency of God was not a cultural sugaring of the pill of the rejection of Aristotelian orthodoxy, but one that was sincerely made. It requires the hindsight allowed by modern particle physics to dismiss religious atomism as a debasing of the philosophy, and it requires a wilful blindness to history to identify an allergy to the science of matter as a defining characteristic of faith. The theistic revivers of atomism, as well as those virtuosi who sought God in other areas of natural philosophy, were not only a type of scientist, they were also a type of Christian.

### ATOMISM, THE CHURCH AND GALILEO

We are still left with the issue of the attitude of the Church, and the lengths to which it was prepared to go to protect Christian orthodoxy from the threat of materialism. We should not downplay the reality and significance of clerical opposition to atomism. There surely were many churchmen who were disturbed by its implications. Some perhaps

were even horrified. Atheist atomism was going to be a provocation to a Church willing to defend its orthodoxy by force, and so many of the tenets of the philosophy ran counter to official Christian teaching that believers who engaged with it always risked falling into heresy. Once the Eucharist had been anchored in the Aristotelian matter theory of essences and accidents, any sympathy towards the view that the properties of objects are defined only by the physical arrangement of the atoms within them was likely to appear suspect. Certainly, defensive responses could be institutionalised and individuals could suffer. Nicholas d'Aurecourt *was* censured by a Church that forced him to renounce and burn his own writings. Giordano Bruno *was* condemned to die in part for espousing heretical ideas that were directly influenced by his atomism. The increasing interest in atomism in the seventeenth century, and increasing willingness to challenge Aristotelianism, must be balanced against the continuing risks associated with the philosophy.<sup>88</sup>

But under anti-religionism's determination to find violent insecurity at the heart of the Church's relations with the material world it despises, the temptation to myth-making appears to be acute. Just how far the preclusion of clerical neurosis appears to cloud the very reading of historical accounts—prompting anti-religionists to find the diagnosis supported by historians who never wrote any such thing—is demonstrated by the case of the third of Onfray's martyrs for atomism: Galileo. We all, Onfray notes, think we know the story of Galileo's condemnation for arguing that the earth moves around the sun. But the story is myth:

In fact, things happened differently. What did the Vatican *really* hold against Galileo? No so much his defence of Copernican astronomy – although this was a thesis that contradicted the church's Aristotelian position – as his adherence to the materialist camp...Before the courts of the day, heliocentrism was punishable by lifelong house arrest, a relatively mild sentence. Defence of atomism, on the other hand, led directly to the stake! That being so, why not confess to the less damaging charge? In other words, acknowledge the venial sin of heliocentrism rather than the deadly atomic error.<sup>89</sup>

Although he does not acknowledge it, Onfray is referring here to the theory put forward by the Italian historian, Pietro Redondi, in the early 1980s. It is now widely rejected and associated in the minds of many historians with the (to some, maverick) idiosyncrasies of Redondi's

interpretative method.<sup>90</sup> But even those sympathetic to the thesis would find Onfray's use of it to be a distortion.

The Galileo case, Onfray believes, is eloquent testimony to the perpetual horror with which the Church viewed atomism. Revealed as an atomist, Galileo's persecution at the highest levels was a forgone conclusion. Moreover, the trial reveals the lethal primacy given to materialism in the scheme of Inquisitorial neuroses. Onfray appears to imagine a bureaucracy of revulsion driven by stark and implacable equations: heliocentrism = imprisonment, atomism = death. Into this bureaucracy the noble Galileo was thrust and his response showed how well he understood it. Given the way in which Onfray expresses it ('why not confess to the less damaging charge?'), the reader unfamiliar with the Redondi thesis might even conclude that he suggests that Galileo won, his recantation of Copernicanism being an outmanoeuvring of the Inquisition rather than a humiliation into which he was forced.

Redondi argued none of this in his 1983 book, *Galileo eretico* ('Galileo: Heretic'). He certainly claimed to have found evidence that atomism was central to the events of 1633, and that the admission of Copernican heresy had been a ruse that spared Galileo a trial for a more serious materialist offence. But he located these events, not in some grand battle between an ill-defined 'science' and an equally ill-defined 'Church', but in the micropolitics of early seventeenth-century Rome, and of the pontificate of Urban VIII in particular—i.e. he placed the struggle over Galileo's atomism firmly *within* the Church. The affair, Redondi believed, was a central drama in the brief, but extraordinary period in which powerful factions in support of the New Philosophy, who championed the study of nature free from the constraints of Aristotelian tradition, were able to be aligned with a reformist papacy after the election of Maffeo Barberini in August 1623.<sup>91</sup> The Jesuits, by contrast, greeted the new regime with deep suspicion. They were the self-conscious guardians of Aristotelian orthodoxy, and they believed that meeting the Protestant threat required cultural rigidity not liberalisation.

As the conclave was underway, Galileo's book, *The Assayer*, was being prepared for publication. In it, he argued that qualities such as colour, taste or odour were not inherent to a substance (the Aristotelian position) but were produced only by its interaction with the animal senses. This, Redondi argued, was an advocacy of a new physics, built upwards from the study of the non-subjective physical properties of matter, that could only raise the spectre of Democritus and Lucretius. The permissive

cultural milieu of the Barberini pontificate allowed *The Assayer's* anti-Aristotelianism to become *de rigueur* among both fashionable Roman society and the Curia.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, the new regime cultivated its connections with the innovators in a calculated insult to the Jesuits. Redondi's evidence for the conspiracy around Galileo's atomism was set out based on the assumption that the reader had grasped the nature and significance of the alliance; indeed, the theory could not otherwise be properly understood.

*The Assayer* could expect a harsh response from conservative quarters,<sup>93</sup> but Redondi believed that here lay an enigma which historians had failed to investigate. In April 1625, Galileo received word that the book had been denounced to the Inquisition, charged with Copernicanism. The case had been given for consideration to one Father Guevara, who had concluded that the book's 'doctrine of motion' was not heretical.<sup>94</sup> To Redondi this simply made no sense. *The Assayer* did not advocate Copernicanism. No theological judgement on the 'doctrine of motion' would have been required. In pursuing this 'fascinating mystery', Redondi discovered in the archives of the Holy Office what he took to be the original denunciation. This discussed not heliocentrism but atomism, and claimed that Galileo's argument concerning the senses must undermine transubstantiation.<sup>95</sup> Once it was understood that *The Assayer* was denounced for atomism, the mystery began to evaporate. *The Assayer*, Redondi conjectured, had been given to Guevara because he himself had written on the senses and their relationship to the sacrament. His opinion would have been 'vastly sufficient' to put an end to the investigation.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, this had been done in the interests and on the authority of Urban VIII, for suspicion with regards to Galileo's orthodoxy automatically questioned that of the new regime.<sup>97</sup>

Beneath the surface politics, there is implicit in Redondi's narrative a suggestion apparently inconceivable to Onfray—that it was possible to procure from within the Church an authoritative theological judgement that Galileo's atomism was not heretical. Guevara admired Galileo but did not agree with him. He preferred an explanation of sense perception based on the Thomist doctrine of 'species'—that objects transmit simulacra of themselves which are assimilated by the sense organs.<sup>98</sup> In terms of the Eucharist, the new substance formed in transubstantiation was spiritual and so could not be detected, but the species of the bread and wine remained to be perceived by the communicant. Guevara's view, then, also differed from the Aristotelian explanation of the Eucharist

miracle, but it was also not heretical. The Council of Trent (Session 13, Canon 2) had declared anathema only for those who believed that some part of the bread or wine remained that was not transformed into Christ (consubstantiation). It had not addressed the issue of sense perception and so declared no orthodoxy on it. Guevara, Redondi concluded, would know that Galileo's account of sense perception was no more a violation of the canons of Trent than his own. He would have declared that the implications of such atomism were not formerly heretical, and he would have been theologically correct.<sup>99</sup>

This makes a simple but important point about the differing pictures of the Church's relationship to atomism offered by Redondi and Onfray. For all Redondi emphasised the intense seriousness with which atomism was taken, he recognised that the response to it was far from monolithic. Atomism could be both attacked and defended within the grey area concerning perception that surrounded the creedal fact of transubstantiation. So Redondi formed his analysis by considering the ways in which opposing theological prejudices shaped explorations of this grey area, and by understanding the complex fluidity of influence within the Roman Church by which their fortunes were determined. In the political climate of the early Barberini pontificate it was simply not sufficient for *The Assayer's* detractors to raise the spectre of Democritus, and the Jesuits' claim to authority as the guardians of Aristotelianism and doctrinal rigour could be rejected by a papacy which was strong enough to go elsewhere for its judgements on orthodoxy. But Redondi was by no means suggesting that the grey area was a safe place to go exploring. In Counter-Reformation Rome, where theology and politics were so tightly intertwined, the accusation against *The Assayer* remained, 'shelved but still pending like a Sword of Damocles.'<sup>100</sup> The sword would fall in 1632, but Urban would ensure that it missed its target.

The Rome in which the first copies of Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* began to appear was very different from that which had greeted *The Assayer*. The city had been threatened for over a year by both plague and war, and Urban's Vatican was in crisis. The pro-Spanish party and the Jesuits were in the ascendant, the pope's association with the innovators had become a dangerous liability.<sup>101</sup> So ended the progressive alliance with its 'inebriating atmosphere' of intellectual possibility.<sup>102</sup> In such a hostile environment the denunciation of the *Dialogue* was perhaps unsurprising, and Redondi believed that it

most likely involved a restatement by members of the Collegio Romano of the accusations made against *The Assayer*.<sup>103</sup>

The attack on the *Dialogue* ‘met with a very strange fate’, however. If Galileo was indeed accused of Eucharistic heresy it would be political suicide for Urban to allow him to be tried on that basis.<sup>104</sup> A special commission instead furnished the Inquisition with a distraction: the *Dialogue* had violated an injunction issued in 1616 that Galileo was not to publish in favour of Copernicanism.<sup>105</sup> But Galileo was unaware of what had been done on his behalf. He pugnaciously defended himself by showing that he had received no injunction against discussing Copernicanism as a *hypothetical* model.<sup>106</sup> Yet after a private meeting with the commissary general, Vincenzo Maculano, Galileo accepted that in his zeal he might have inadvertently overstepped his bounds and that the *Dialogue* could be read as advocating literal Copernicanism. Historians have assumed that Maculano threatened Galileo with torture. For Redondi this did not ring true. Such an unusual extra-judicial measure would be entirely unnecessary since torture could be threatened in the normal proceedings of the Inquisition. More likely was that Maculano was a co-conspirator, and used the meeting to successfully explain to Galileo the true peril in which he stood, and that his interests lay in cooperating with the Copernican distraction.<sup>107</sup>

Why, as he reads *Galileo eretico*, does Onfray see only an account of an implacable hatred of the Church entire for science and matter, when Redondi had laboured for three hundred and fifty pages to stress the opposite: that Galileo was caught in the struggle between clerical engagement with the New Philosophy and clerical resistance? The suggestion of an answer surely lies within his own prose. In Onfray’s entire discussion of the Christian hatred of science and matter, only one persecuting churchman is actually allowed a name, and that only in passing.<sup>108</sup> The assumption is that the Church endlessly fashions each generation of its clerics in ignorance and bigotry as mere ciphers of its terrible and destructive inadequacies. Individuality is conceded only to those clerics who stepped beyond the mental confines of orthodoxy. When it comes to history, Onfray—and this could be argued of most of the New Atheists—is simply not interested in orthodox churchmen as human beings.

Redondi’s clerics, by contrast, were capable of engaging with complexities of the New Philosophy and able to consider an uncertain and troubling theory in the light of precisely what the canons of Trent did



and did not say. They were willing to exploit the grey areas of theology to promote their own favoured philosophies at the expense of someone else's. They took heresy seriously but were capable of manipulating, and even of subverting, the Church's institutions for the maintenance of orthodoxy, either to denounce a rival or protect a favourite. All of this would interact with the fluid context of Vatican politics, of course, but that, after all, was Redondi's point.

Atomism is, of course, only one part of a story that encompasses a much broader range of philosophies and points of conflict, all of which could be given the same attention. It offers suggestive insights only, not definitive conclusions. But it provides an instructive case study of the ignorance, muddle and occasionally sheer artificiality of the 'history' of the perennial superiority of the non-theist mind; a history offered by those who claim to have inherited the intellectual rigour they mythologize.

## NOTES

1. *GiNG*, 64, 258; *GatFoF*, 55; *GatA*, 12; *IDoA*, 83; Harding, *How to Be a Good Atheist*, 45; White, *Galileo Antichrist*, 30.
2. *IDoA*, 83.
3. *Ibid.*, 84.
4. *GatA*, 42–44; *GatFoF*, 62–63.
5. *Ibid.*, 57–58, 62–65, and, in a different context, 91.
6. *GatA*, 46.
7. *Ibid.*, 15, 47–49, 72–73.
8. *GiNG*, 259.
9. *IDoA*, 82.
10. *Ibid.*, 83–89, quote at 83.
11. *Ibid.*, 88.
12. *GiNG*, 259; *IDoA*, 89; White, *Galileo Antichrist*, 34–35.
13. Hans Christian von Baeyer, *Taming the Atom*, 3; Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Paul, 1979), II, 40; Bernard Pullman, *The Atom in the History of Human Thought*, trans. Axel Reisinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ix–x.
14. Pullman, *The Atom*, ix–x; von Baeyer, *Taming the Atom*, 4; Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, II, 41.
15. Alan Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone: How Science Succeeded and Philosophy Failed to Gain Knowledge of Atoms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 2, 11–12, 39; see also J. R. Milton, 'The

- Limitations of Ancient Atomism', in C. J. Tuplin and T. E. Rihl (eds.), *Science and Mathematics in Ancient Greek Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 178–188.
16. The descriptions come from a summary of Democritus' system by Theophrastus. See testimonia **113** in Christopher Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 113–114 (taste), 115–116 (colour) [Taylor divides the sources in his collection between the authentic 'fragments' written by the atomists themselves and 'testimonia'—the summaries and commentaries provided by other writers. For clarity, I cite these sources via the testimony number ascribed by Taylor, given in bold with the author in brackets, followed by the page numbers of the collection.] See also Andrew Pyle, *Atomism and Its Critics: From Democritus to Newton* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), 101–106.
  17. Cyril Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), 90–97.
  18. *Ibid.*, 102–103, 158–159.
  19. Paul Cartledge, *Democritus* (London: Phoenix, 1998), 3 (author's emphasis).
  20. Meinard Kuhlmann, *The Ultimate Constituents of the Material World: In Search of an Ontology* (Lancaster: Gazelle, 2010), 13; Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone*, 2.
  21. Kuhlmann, *The Ultimate Constituents of the Material World*, 9; Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone*, 261–262.
  22. *GatA*, 262, 266–272, 276–277.
  23. There are other examples. Contrast, for instance, Stenger's claim that Democritus understood the mechanics of sight—photons as atoms of light interacting with the eye—with the philosopher's actual claim that images are formed externally of air compressed into a waxy solid between streams of atoms flowing off both object and viewer, which then travels to the eye. *Ibid.*, 26; Testimonia **113** (Theophrastus) in Taylor, *The Atomists*, 108–109, commentary at 208–211; Kelli Rudolph, 'Democritus' Perspectival Theory of Vision', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 131 (2011), 67–83.
  24. *GatFoF*, 57, 60, 61; *GatA*, 12, 42, 262.
  25. *Ibid.*, 42.
  26. Lucretius, *The Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (London: Penguin, 2007), V.837–854.
  27. *Ibid.*, V.805–825.
  28. *Ibid.*, V.795–800, 826–827.

29. Ibid., II.700–718, V.921–925; see also the summary by S. Blundell, quoted in Gordon Campbell, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura Book Five, Lines 772–1104* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 178.
30. Ibid., V.926–987.
31. Ibid., V.1011–1027, 1091–1457.
32. Campbell, *Lucretius on Creation and Evolution*, 8.
33. Peter Atkins, *Galileo's Finger: The Ten Great Ideas of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 136.
34. Kiempe Alegra, 'The Beginnings of Cosmology', in A. A. Long, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46–49.
35. Bailey, *The Atomists and Epicurus*, 12, 43.
36. David Sedley, 'Parmenides and Melissus', in Long, *Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, 113–125; Andrew Pyle, *Atomism*, 41–44; Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone*, 21–22; Bailey, *The Atomists and Epicurus*, 24–27; Kuhlmann, *The Ultimate Constituents of the Material World*, 10.
37. The phrase is Bailey's, see *The Atomists and Epicurus*, 71.
38. Pyle, *Atomism*, 44–49, 106–108; Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone*, 24–25; Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists*, 118–121; Pullman, *The Atom*, 32.
39. *GatA*, 42–44.
40. Pyle, *Atomism*, 57, 59.
41. Ibid., 60–62, quotes at 60 and 61.
42. Ibid., 70, 167–169.
43. *GatA*, 45.
44. Pyle, *Atomism*, 179; Milton, 'The Limitation of Ancient Atomism', 184–185.
45. Ibid., 179–181.
46. Ibid., 181–187, quotes at 183 and 187; Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield, *The Architecture of Matter* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1965), 77.
47. Christopher C. W. Taylor, 'Democritus and Lucretius on Death and Dying', in Aldo Brancacci and Pierre-Marie Morel (eds.), *Democritus, Science, the Arts and the Care of the Soul* (Lieden: Brill, 2007), 77.
48. See Testimonia 132 a–d (Ps-Plutarch, Cicero and Aristotle), Testimonia 133 a & b (Plutarch), in Taylor, *The Atomists*, 126–127; for Taylor's commentary, including his critique of 'reductionist' suggestions that these *eidōla* might not have been seen as literally alive, see 207–208.
49. Testimonia 172 a–d, 173b, 175 a & b (Cicero, Augustine, Sextus, Plutarch), in ibid., 138–141; ibid., 211–214.

50. Taylor, 'Democritus and Lucretius on Death and Dying', 77–78.
51. Ibid., 78; Bailey, *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*, 158–159.
52. Taylor, 'Democritus and Lucretius on Death and Dying', 78.
53. Testimonia 112a–d (Cicero, Ps-Plutarch, Tertullian, Proclus), in Taylor, *The Atomists*, 107; id., 'Democritus and Lucretius on Death and Dying', 79.
54. It was, Taylor argues, an Epicurean innovation to identify the mind as the organising locus of sentience, situated in the chest and separate from the rest of the soul that permeated the body, see *ibid.*, 80.
55. *IDoA*, 89.
56. Ibid., 84–85.
57. *GatA*, 25.
58. Ibid, 13, 25.
59. Ibid, 47–50, 62, 72–73.
60. Ibid, 13.
61. Christophe Grellard and Aurélian Robert, 'Introduction', in their, *Atomism in Late Medieval Philosophy and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3–8.
62. Marie Boas, 'The Establishment of the Mechanical Philosophy', *Osiris*, vol. 10 (1952), 425.
63. For survey of the re-emergence of interest in atomism in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries see *ibid.*, 422–433.
64. Monte Johnson and Catherine Wilson, 'Lucretius and the History of Science', in Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 134–135.
65. Boas, 'The Establishment of the Mechanical Philosophy', 433.
66. Pyle, *Atomism*, 226–231; Chalmers, *The Scientist's Atom and the Philosopher's Stone*, 88–89; Christoph Meinel, 'Early Seventeenth-Century Atomism: Theory, Epistemology, and the Insufficiency of Experiment', *Isis*, vol. 79 (1) (1988), 73–74.
67. Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 45.
68. Margaret Osler, 'Baptizing Epicurean Atomism: Pierre Gassendi on the Immortality of the Soul', in Margaret Osler and Laurence Farber (eds.), *Religion, Science, and Worldview: Essays in Honor of Richard S. Westfall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171.
69. *GatA*, 72.
70. Ibid., 56–59, quote at 58, see also 75–76.
71. Osler, *Divine will and the mechanical philosophy*, 51–52; B. J. T. Dobbs, *The Janus Faces of Genius: The Role of Alchemy in Newton's Thought* (Cambridge, 1991), 35.

72. Quoted in J. J. MacIntosh, 'Robert Boyle on Epicurean Atheism and Atomism', in M. Osler (ed.), *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 215. Boyle's treatise against atheism, in which his critique of atomism is set out was unpublished. It is now available transcribed and edited by MacIntosh as *Robert Boyle on Atheism* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
73. Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light* (4th ed., London, 1730), 378.
74. Matthew Goodrum, 'Atomism, Atheism, and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings: The Debate over a Natural Origin of the First Humans in Seventeenth-Century Britain', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 63 (2) (2002), 213–219.
75. MacIntosh, 'Robert Boyle on Epicurean Atheism and Atomism', 206, 216–217.
76. For a discussion of the argument from design see John R. Shook, *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheist and Believers (and Everyone in Between)* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 96–99, 137–144; Kerry Walters, *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 57–61; Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*, chapter 2; Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* chapter 4.
77. *TGD*, 137–151.
78. *Ibid.*, 139, 143.
79. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (London: Penguin, 2006, first published 1986), 5–6; although this should be contrasted with Dawkins much harder line in *TGD*, 103.
80. MacIntosh, 'Robert Boyle on Epicurean Atheism and Atomism', 219, n. 64.
81. *Ibid.*, 211–212.
82. *Ibid.*, 212.
83. Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 20–25; Goodrum, 'Atomism, Atheism and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings', 212–213.
84. Pyle, *Atomism*, 413–416. For other examples see Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, 48–50, 54–55; Robert Kargon, 'Walter Charleton, Robert Boyle, and the Acceptance of Epicurean Atomism in England', *Isis*, vol. 55 (2) (1964), 186–187; Antonio Clericuzio, *Elements, Principles and Corpuscles: A Study of Atomism and Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 69–71, 88–89; Goodrum, 'Atomism, Atheism and the Spontaneous

- Generation of Human Beings', 211; MacIntosh, 'Robert Boyle on Epicurean Atheism and Atomism', 205.
85. Goodrum, 'Atomism, Atheism and the Spontaneous Generation of Human Beings', 213–222.
  86. *TGD*, 124, my emphasis.
  87. *T&L*, 88–97.
  88. Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, IV (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 186–187; Tad M. Schmaltz, *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–30; Saul Fisher, *Pierre Gassendi's Philosophy and Science: Atomism for Empiricists* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 202–203.
  89. *IDoA*, 85–68.
  90. See particularly Vincenzo Ferrone and Massimo Firpo, 'From Inquisitors to Microhistorians: A Critique of Pietro Redondi's *Galileo eretico*', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 58 (2) (1986), 485–524.
  91. Redondi, *Galileo: Heretic*, chapter 3.
  92. *Ibid.*, 72–80.
  93. *Ibid.*, 71.
  94. Quoted in *ibid.*, 139.
  95. *Ibid.*, 333–334.
  96. *Ibid.*, 169–172.
  97. *Ibid.*, 147.
  98. *Ibid.*, 170.
  99. *Ibid.*
  100. *Ibid.*, 191–195.
  101. *Ibid.*, 230–231.
  102. *Ibid.*, 231–232.
  103. *Ibid.*, 232–242.
  104. *Ibid.*, 244.
  105. *Ibid.*, 247.
  106. *Ibid.*, 259.
  107. *Ibid.*, 257–258.
  108. This is Bishop Jaques-Bénigne Bossuet, *IDoA*, 93.



## CHAPTER 6

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# Heroes and Martyrs: Witch-Hunting and the Dangers of Scepticism

We learn as much about totalitarianism by studying those who were complicit as those who resisted. We probably learn more. Yet when we begin to understand the processes by which ordinary, non-psychopathic people became actors in the brutal tragedies of Nazism and Stalinism, stories of resistance appear to take on ever greater significance. They provide a resort from the uncomfortable truth of the ease of complicity. As study after study suggests that the line between ordinary citizen and totalitarian collaborator is very fine, we seem to find more need, not less, to flatter ourselves that we would have been among the Schindlers, the Stauffenburgs and the Solzhenitsyns; that, for all its apparent ubiquity, the fine line is someone else's problem.

The New Atheist mythology of religious totalitarianism is prey to the same tendency. The atrocities of the Inquisitions, the Crusades or the witch-hunts offer most to anti-religionists when it can be assumed that they were perpetrated by people fundamentally unlike them, as an expression of some evil or madness that they could never share. So it becomes desirable to also believe that those who stood out against such crimes must have been, in some fundamental way, made differently from their contemporaries. From there it is a small step to close the polemical circle and think that the difference must have lain in their being gifted with a rationalism more like ours.

This is certainly the view of Sam Harris. The true nature of the witch-hunt, he tells us, eventually revealed itself to small number able to see its 'insanity.' Those who escaped unscathed were 'fortunate.' Rationalist

histories have long argued that challenging a practice in which so much theological capital was invested was acutely dangerous. Few of these men avoided censure and one, it is claimed, ended his resistance to witch-hunting at the stake. Harris has adopted this history wholesale, offering the fate of those who ventured to oppose witch-hunting as a particularly sharply focused illustration of the intellectual and moral superiority of rationalism, ranged against the enveloping, totalitarian power of religious delusion.<sup>1</sup>

Here the ennobling of rationalism is based around two necessary but, in fact, contradictory claims. Were there no evidence that anybody doubted the reality of witchcraft, the persecution would appear less an active choice and more a tragic inevitability. That even a handful of people were able to doubt, and do so as products of the same intellectual milieu that moulded the witch-hunters, indicates that premodern culture held the potential for genuine rationalism, whatever its superstitious norms. If so, scepticism appears to represent the very best of that culture whilst witch-beliefs appear *actively*, rather than only *passively* credulous. But another tendency of rationalist history emphasises instead how far the opponents of witch-hunting were ahead of their time. If witch-beliefs represented the height of medievalism, then surely scepticism was a self-conscious break with it. Rationalism is now presented as a rarefied insight that transcended premodern culture and was the preserve of the few most enlightened. By ignoring the contradiction, the polemical capital gained is extensive. As they read the terrible history of the witch-hunt, modern theists must, it seems, imagine their own hands lighting the pyres. Modern non-believers can, by contrast, take pride in the heroism of their own kind.

But, in fact, the modernity of the witchcraft sceptics is in most cases illusory. Very often the reasons for their opposition, were they actually understood, would appear to modern rationalists to be as credulous (perhaps even as delusional) as the belief in the crime itself.

Common sense or inspiration? Neither account of anti-witch-hunting is trustworthy as historical polemic, problems amply demonstrated in *The End of Faith*. There we are presented with two exemplars of heroic scepticism: Dietrich Flade, whose opposition may have brought about his own burning in 1589; and Friedrich Spee, a German Jesuit whose *Cautio Criminalis* (1631) attacked the certainties of witch trial procedure. Neither, however, was as Harris presents him.



## HOW GEORGE LINCOLN BURR'S HISTORY OF DIETRICH FLADE DIDN'T MAKE IT INTO *THE END OF FAITH*

Harris quotes Bertrand Russell's description of Dietrich Flade's sufferings at the hands of the witch-hunters who had once been his comrades:

Some few bold rationalists ventured, even while the persecution was at its height, to doubt whether tempests, hail-storms, thunder and lightening were really caused by the machinations of women. Such men were shown no mercy. Thus towards the end of the sixteenth century Flade, Rector of the University of Trèves, and Chief Judge of the Electoral Court, after condemning countless witches, began to think that perhaps their confessions were due to the desire to escape from the tortures of the rack, with the result that he showed unwillingness to convict. He was accused of having sold himself to Satan, and was subjected to the same tortures as he had inflicted upon others. Like them, he confessed his guilt, and in 1589 he was strangled and then burnt.<sup>2</sup>

This account is the result of a progressive distortion of the Flade case, in which it was shaped—by Russell and by his own source, Andrew Dickson White—into a suitably straightforward and emotive narrative of superstitious persecution. Harris is apparently unaware of the provenance of his exemplar tale, but its transformation from history to polemic can be precisely traced.

In 1891, the American historian, George Lincoln Burr, published a detailed study based on his rediscovery of the original trial documents. He concluded that opposition to witch-hunting was the most plausible explanation for Flade's downfall, but made it clear that the evidence was entirely circumstantial.<sup>3</sup> In 1896, the story gained a much wider audience in White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, on which Burr had worked as editorial assistant.<sup>4</sup> White praised the 'careful' approach of his protégé but showed no inclination to emulate it, instead producing a one-dimensional tale of martyrdom. After forty years, *A History* was still the pre-eminent text in the canon of rationalist history, and it exercised a strong influence on Russell's *Religion and Science*, published in 1935. Russell added further exaggeration of the facts and an even heavier dose of modernist condescension.

The condemnation of Dietrich Flade was an episode in the great Trier witch-hunt of 1581–1593. This extraordinarily lethal concentration of

witch-trials gathered momentum gradually in the wake of a series of agricultural crises. Flade indeed seems to have taken a moderate line over witchcraft accusations in his own court, a position which may well have thrown him into conflict with a number of zealous local witch-hunters. One of these, Johann Zandt von Marll, apparently determined to rid himself of the troublesome magistrate. A number of suspects in Zandt's court testified to having seen Flade at sabbats, and to his having led the destruction of crops and cattle. Twenty-three convicted witches named Flade over two years. He himself attempted to flee as his position became increasingly vulnerable, a costly mistake that was taken as evidence of his guilt. Flade was ultimately tortured until he confessed and then executed.

Burr considered witch-hunting a crime of faith, even 'a nightmare of Christian thought',<sup>5</sup> but his interest in the Flade case lay primarily in the judge's status. That 'no less a personage' should suffer the fate of a common witch was unprecedented and 'never again...did the persecution strike so high.'<sup>6</sup> For Burr it raised the spectre of political machination.

It was Zandt's investigations that turned up the first accusations against Flade in 1587, most damagingly when one of the condemned shouted his guilt even as she was being led to the stake. 'No witch', Burr noted, 'casting about in the torture chamber for some name on which to fasten the accusation her inquisitors relentlessly demanded, was likely to forget that Maria of Erhang had accused the well-known judge of Trier.'<sup>7</sup> Accusations thus multiplied and by April 1588 Zandt had his star witness, Margarethe of Euren, who testified to seeing Flade arrive at a witches' sabbat in a golden coach.<sup>8</sup> In July, a commission was set up to investigate the evidence and collected together the depositions of fourteen witches from six jurisdictions, the most damning evidence coming from Zandt's jurisdiction of Pfazel. It also, however, took account of the retraction of an allegation by one witch. The commission reported to the Archbishop Elector, Johann VII, in August and was ordered to reopen its investigation in early September when new accusations emerged. Its second report, submitted at the end of the month, contained a further six denunciations.<sup>9</sup>

Now Flade felt his position to be so precarious that he had to flee. On the 3rd October he was apprehended and returned to Trier, and a second attempt was thwarted when Flade was followed by a mob and forced to take refuge in the city's cathedral. Now closely watched, he made a final appeal to the Elector in January 1589 to be allowed to go into

monastic exile. But the response was that such were the number of accusations emerging from different jurisdictions that Flade's elevated status could no longer protect him. Indeed, why would a man apparently well known for his love of wealth offer to abandon it for monastic poverty unless he feared what a trial would uncover? In April 1589, Flade was finally arrested, interrogated and his trial set in motion.<sup>10</sup>

Yet even now most of the city oligarchs could hardly be said to have been baying for his blood. As was customary, the theological faculty had been appealed to for an opinion on the canon law implications of the case and either managed to return no judgement at all or one that did not fit with the Elector's intentions, for it was absent from the tribunal.<sup>11</sup> The judiciary themselves were also conspicuous by their absence from the early proceedings, most having conveniently found it necessary to desert the city to avoid the summer pestilence. They had to be summoned back in order for the trial to proceed, but, in August, after Zandt had laid the case before them, they drew up a unanimous request to be excused. This was refused, and so it was only with the forced attendance of the majority of the court functionaries that the trial could finally get under way.<sup>12</sup> Tortured repeatedly over a month, Flade's confession descended from initial evasions to an increasingly detailed confirmation of the allegations. On the 16th September his guilt was pronounced and two days later he was allowed the consideration of being strangled before his pyre was lit.<sup>13</sup>

Was Flade victimised for his resistance to witch-hunting? This seemed to Burr the most plausible explanation, but by no means certain. The first trial for witchcraft in Trier was presided over by Flade himself in the summer of 1582. The accused, a woman named as Greth Braun, resisted through six bouts of torture until she was acquitted. Flade would have conducted the examinations himself and, Burr suggested, it was possible that her successful endurance 'set him thinking.' No records of subsequent witch-trials under Flade survive. But the writings of Johann's deputy, the Jesuit bishop, Peter Binsfeld, were suggestive.<sup>14</sup> He complained of laxity in the prosecution of witches, particularly with regards to an unwillingness to trust the identifications of accomplices obtained through torture. When he noted that he had personally heard a certain magistrate declare that 'he cared naught for a thousand denunciations', his readers would not have had to strain their imaginations to come up with a likely candidate and neither, Burr believed, should historians.<sup>15</sup> On the meaning of Zandt's role in the affair, Burr was circumspect. That

Zandt was both a zealot for witch-hunting and the conniving orchestrator of Flade's downfall seemed clear, but the two were not necessarily connected. In the fraught local politics of the time, there were many ways in which the judge and the governor could have come into conflict and, tempting as the witch-trials might appear as the source of their enmity, that conclusion, Burr was careful to note, would remain only conjecture.<sup>16</sup>

This, then, was as far as Burr was prepared to go. That Flade suffered because of his reluctance to persecute witches was a reasonable supposition to be made on the basis of suggestive circumstantial evidence, but it was far from a discernible historical fact.

It was precisely this circumspection that was overturned White's *A History of the Warfare Between Science and Theology*. The scrupulous jurist was transformed into a rationalist critic of the entirety of witch-hunting, heroically rejecting the tradition of his Church to follow his conscience:

For a time [Flade] yielded to the long line of authorities, ecclesiastical and judicial, supporting the reality of this crime; but he at last seems to have realized that it was unreal, and that the confessions in his torture chamber, of compacts with Satan, riding on broomsticks to the witch-sabbath, raising tempests, producing diseases, and the like, were either the results of madness or of willingness to confess anything and everything, and even to die, in order to shorten the fearful tortures to which the accused were in all cases subjected until a satisfactory confession was obtained.<sup>17</sup>

Yet Burr had been adamant that there was no evidence at all that Flade disbelieved in diabolic witchcraft itself. White continued:

On this conviction of the unreality of many at least of the charges Flade seems to have acted, and he at once received his reward. He was arrested by the authority of the archbishop and charged with having sold himself to Satan—the fact of his hesitation in the persecution being perhaps what suggested his guilt. He was now, in his turn, brought into the torture chamber over which he had once presided, was racked until he confessed everything which his torturers suggested, and finally, in 1589, was strangled and burnt.<sup>18</sup>

The exaggerated certainty of this narrative should be readily apparent. White claimed that Flade's fellow magistrates immediately set about procuring his end. Yet if Flade's reluctance did begin with the Greth Braun case, then his court was probably exhibiting its leniency for some five years before the first accusation against him emerged. It took Zandt a further two years to undermine his position sufficiently to make his guilt appear credible and even then the Trier judiciary acted only with the most extreme reluctance. Finally, exaggerating the possibility that Flade rejected the entirety of witch-beliefs allowed White to maximise the pathos of his end. The 'revered and venerable scholar', whose only offence was to be possessed of a greater reason than his contemporaries, was forced to admit to, and accept an agonising death for, crimes he knew were impossible. In White's hands the suggestive but incomplete story of Dietrich Flade was reshaped into a self-contained rationalist tragedy.

The problems inherent in Harris' chosen version of the story should by now be apparent. There is no indication in *Religion and Science* that Russell was familiar with Burr's study of the Flade case, but he had certainly read *A History of the Warfare Between Science and Theology*, and he simplified the narrative even further. White had argued that the case was an example of how far those who opposed witch-hunting could be persecuted, but he had not suggested that it was representative. Flade was not the only critic whose career and position had suffered, but he was the only one that had been accused of witchcraft himself. Russell now, completely inaccurately, implied that such a fate was commonplace, stressing that 'such men were shown no mercy.'<sup>19</sup>

But more importantly, in Russell's hands, the story now became one of conversion and redemption, albeit one that was notably contradictory. Rather than exhibiting a notorious leniency, Flade was here presented as responsible for the deaths of innumerable innocent women, a fact that lent his new-found rationalism a damascene quality. In this scheme, Flade's martyrdom became an ironic proof of his own case. The erstwhile torturer now underwent the very process in which he had lost all faith, he 'was subjected to the same tortures as he had inflicted upon others.' His confession, as empty as theirs but even more knowingly disingenuous, stood as a stark testimony to the validity of the doubts that had led him away from witch-hunting. Yet Russell could also not resist the sarcastic turn of phrase that would allow him emphasise the naivety of Flade's original credulity and, even more so, the naivety of those unable

to emulate his conversion. Thus: ‘after condemning countless witches, [Flade] began to think that perhaps their confessions were due to the desire to escape from the tortures of the rack.’ Flade’s rationalism was at once both damascene and banal, a narrative confusion that neatly allowed Russell to highlight the bravery of ‘bold rationalists’ whilst at the same time condemning the stupidity of those unable to come to so obvious a conclusion themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, when properly understood, the Flade case opposes rather than supports Harris’ argument. Flade was not executed simply because he was an opponent of witch-hunting, but rather because the Trier judiciary came reluctantly to accept that he was guilty of the crime itself. This is a vital distinction. Zandt may well have been motivated to get rid of an obstacle to his persecuting zeal, but in order to do so he had to procure meaningful evidence of wrongdoing. It was simply not the case that Flade’s opposition to witch-hunting constituted such evidence in the minds of the majority of his colleagues. Instead, after two years the case reached a tipping point when it became impossible not to take seriously the number of denunciations and Flade’s own apparently incriminating behaviour. We do not know the extent to which the question of Flade’s judicial ‘protection’ of witches was raised in the trial, but it is highly likely that it played a supporting role to the accusations of diabolic apostasy and *maleficium*. When, finally, his colleagues brought themselves to consider his guilt, they may well have found significance in the fact that his court was free of witches. But if so, the force of the conclusion lay in hindsight, as a confirmation of other more tangible evidence. Thus, the easy dichotomy between rationalism and delusion suggested by Russell’s polemical version breaks down when the case is considered in detail. Flade appears much less ‘modern’, and his persecutors much less hysterical, when we more correctly see it as an example of witch-hunting as an expression of complex and fractious local politics.

Is Harris, however, on any firmer ground with Friedrich Spee and *Cautio Criminalis*?

### FRIEDRICH SPEE AND THE DEVIL

The damascene narrative is also apparent in Harris’ account of the ‘epiphany’ of Friedrich Spee. He quotes Spee’s famous assessment that ‘[i]f all of us have not confessed ourselves witches, that is only because we have not all been tortured.’<sup>21</sup> The Jesuit confessor was apparently

responding to a stark illustration of the truth of this, carried out for his benefit by the Duke of Brunswick. Invited to observe the plight of a woman in the torture chamber, Spee was shocked when, through leading questions she was brought to confess that she had seen him at sabbats, shape-shifting into a variety of animals and siring monstrous children through fornication with witches. 'Spee was lucky indeed', Harris notes, 'to be in the company of a friend, and certain of his own innocence, immediately set to work on his *Cautio Criminalis* (1631), which detailed the injustice of the witch trials.'<sup>22</sup>

An affecting story, no doubt, but untrue. Harris extracts this account from the book by the nineteenth-century Scottish poet and journalist, Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1841). Similarly to White and Russell, Mackay fashioned an appealing tale around his hero that met the needs of rationalist polemic. Thus, Spee's damascene experience led him to write a book that would immediately become reason's apostle, converting a number of powerful men whose own efforts ushered in 'the beginning of the dawn after the long protracted darkness.' Mackay's narrative, betraying more than a hint of rationalist providentialism, took no account of the complex political and social contexts in which witch-hunting died out in Germany, preferring to see it as the unadulterated triumph of pure reason.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, we know frustratingly little about the composition of *Cautio Criminalis*.<sup>24</sup> We certainly cannot attach it to any specific event in Spee's life and it is difficult to trace his career as witch confessor. A traditional assumption was that he was involved in the dreadful Würzburg and Bamberg outbreaks of 1628–1630. But this was surmised on the basis of a famous anecdote, recorded by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, that Spee told a young canon at Würzburg (a future archbishop of Mainz) that his hair had turned prematurely grey as the result of accompanying many women to the stake, not a single of whom he believed to be guilty.<sup>25</sup> Historians now agree that he cannot have been at the Würzburg or Bamberg trials since he is known to then have been moving between Cologne, Hildesheim and Paderborn. Much more likely is that he was involved in the less sensational witch-trials of the latter, where he was sent in late 1629, and in the neighbouring Duchy of Westphalia, where it is entirely plausible that he operated as confessor in several nearby towns.<sup>26</sup> We do not know when Spee began writing *Cautio Criminalis*. If he was most deeply involved in witch-trials during his time at Paderborn, this perhaps gives us the most plausible date.

That Spee was probably not involved in one of the super-hunts in no way diminishes the harrowing nature of his experiences or the force of his book. But this career is less easily reconciled with a damascene conversion amid a pandemonium of delusional fear and bloodlust. Spee's experiences showed him that the majority of witches were innocents victimised by torture. This much he tells us. But another part of Leibniz's story, less well remembered than the colour of Spee's hair, suggests that his views were not formed suddenly in the torture chamber, but gradually through his attendance upon the condemned. They, Leibniz related, confessed their guilt to Spee upon meeting him, fearful that denial would lead to a repetition of torture. But, learning to trust him, they 'in their last moments had called upon God to witness their innocence.'<sup>27</sup> Spee became an opponent of witch-hunting through his role as confessor and, as he shaped his radical critique, that is how he continued to see himself. Indeed, for the modern translator of the book, Marcus Hellyer, it should be read as a remarkable extension of the confessional, applied through reprimands offered to the entire political elite.<sup>28</sup> The key to understanding Spee's abhorrence of witch-hunting is hardly one likely to sit comfortably with the New Atheists. For it is to understand that his rationalism was never an end in itself, it was always a tool in the service of the Catholic cure of souls.

To see what this means, we have to do what Sam Harris has apparently not done; we have to read *Cautio Criminalis*.

Without question, it was a courageous work, so much so in fact that there is some reason to doubt whether Spee intended its publication. It was printed in the Protestant town of Rinteln, the result apparently of an act of pious theft. As Hellyer, notes, Spee's arguments were hardly novel, but his rhetorical skill and his willingness to apply it to criticising those in power set *Cautio Criminalis* apart.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Spee stood out also by virtue of the sheer humanity of his writing. The image of his hair was potent but superfluous. *Cautio Criminalis* itself eloquently expressed his anguish, and his sympathy for the victims of witch-hunting was unconditional. For Spee, the logic of torture simply broke down in the face of a genuinely empathic understanding of the experience of its subjects. Judicial theory assumed that suspects experienced each stage of an interrogation with mental consistency. Outside the torture chamber, the guilty would deny their crimes because that was easier than admitting to them, inside they would confess because that was easier than bearing the pain. Yet observing the process taught



Spee that instead torture radically altered the mindset of its victim. Pain focused attention (as indeed it was supposed to) on the immediate experience, distorting the ability to think clearly about the longer term consequences of what might be said at that moment. Thus, most witches would confess simply to end their suffering: 'the toughest men who were strung up in torture for the most serious crimes have solemnly affirmed to me that they could think of no crime so great that they would not immediately admit to it if their confession would free them for just a moment from such agony.'

But Spee went much further than this. The supposed safety net against false confession was the death sentence that would be its result; surely no innocent would so condemn herself? In reality, however, the torture chamber operated on an entirely different logic. The fear of eventual death was superseded by the fear of immediate pain.<sup>30</sup> Only the most naive overestimate of one's own powers of endurance could lead to the belief that the innocent do not lie under torture. 'I confess', Spee famously declared, 'that I myself could offer so little resistance to such punishment that if I were brought into be interrogated I would not hesitate right at the beginning to declare myself guilty of any witchcraft whatsoever and embrace death rather than such torments.'<sup>31</sup>

Thus far Spee appears much as Harris would have us see him: a rationalist able to see beyond the common prejudices and superstitions of his culture, perhaps even a man familiar to us by virtue of his modernity. However, any apparent connection between Spee and modern secular rationalism is illusory. We must keep in mind just exactly what Spee was being rational about. The radicalism of *Cautio Criminalis* lay only in its judicial critique; demonologically Spee was a conservative.<sup>32</sup> The book contains no attack on the reality of witchcraft itself, instead it opens with a defence of the belief in the power of malefic sorcery. There were many, Spee noted, who doubted that witches existed at all, but he was not among them, albeit he believed the crime was extremely rare.<sup>33</sup> Of course, we might suspect that Spee felt compelled to pay lip service to witch-beliefs so as to protect himself. But there is no compelling reason not to take him at his word. After all, he was exposing corruption, incompetence and neglect at the highest levels, a position, if anything, far more dangerous than a broad, depersonalised attack on the demonic belief system. It is certainly not obvious that he should have felt the need to be more reticent with regard to the latter.

More than anything else, Spee was a concerned Christian, and Harris might be surprised at how large Satan's power loomed in *Cautio Criminalis*. Like many opponents of the witch-trials before him, Spee found in witch-hunting tangible evidence of a diabolic plot against the Christian community. Both the exaggerated fear of the crime, and the disproportionate response to it, were means by which Satan subverted communal harmony and overturned the values of charity and compassion ordained by God. Witch-hunting enveloped both accusers and accused within a world where lying was prescribed and virtuous, where sins of numerous kinds were enforced, where zealots and sadists were given licence and where innocence was punished. All of this was presided over by those whose duty it was protect the godly community from diabolic subversion. Spee argued (and he was not alone in this) that torture itself was a demonic invention; thus he was willing to place diabolism at the heart of German magisterial practice. He was sure at least some of those officials engaged in witch-hunting were satanic agents. A zealous inquisitor condemns the innocent through torture: 'clearly there can be no doubt that the Devil eagerly wishes for and strives toward that, since when he finds even one such inquisitor he has an open door for greatly enlarging his kingdom.' Moreover, it would be 'quite astonishing' if Satan 'could not manage to sneak more of them into the ranks of judges and inquisitors.' Lest we suspect that this was merely a well-aimed rhetorical flourish, consider the example Spee used to illustrate his point:

A trustworthy man recently told me about an executioner who was himself executed. Among his serious crimes was this one: since he was skilled in magic, through his art he forced whomever he got into his hands to confess to whatever he asked. So he compelled many innocent people to proclaim things that perhaps they themselves would never have thought of.<sup>34</sup>

Presenting abuse as justice and chaos as governance, the witch-trials were the world turned upside down, and the world turned upside down was the hallmark of Satan.

It is impossible for the modern secular reader not to be moved by the compassion of *Cautio Criminalis*, but Spee's humanity was not ours. Rather, it was the concern of a Jesuit priest appalled at witch-hunting's subversion of the cure of souls. Horrified as he was by the physical suffering of witches, it was the spiritual estate of both accuser and accused that was foremost in his mind. The interrogation process, which demanded a series of preordained lies on the part of its victims, enveloped everyone

involved in sin. The first lie—the admission of witchcraft—produced only the demand for more in the naming of accomplices. The accused would name those she knew to have a bad reputation, and so was forced into the crime of malicious accusation. Those who had lied in the moment would bear the guilt of this once they were freed from the torture chamber. They were commonly plunged into despair when they were returned to prison, and, without a sympathetic confessor, neglected the well-being of their souls as they awaited their end.

In this, we see the real significance of the rejection of torture for Spee. It was not simply that it led to false confession, but that it engendered such profound fear that victims would rather face damnation:

...there are many who will falsely inform on others under torture. Afterward, however, these people realise that they cannot be absolved of their sins in the sacrament of penance until they save those whom they have put in mortal danger through their false denunciations. But they respond that they cannot do it because they are afraid that if they utter a retraction they will be put to the torture again. If their confessor insists that under penalty of eternal damnation they cannot leave innocent people guilty and that some way has to be found to save them, they often respond that they are prepared to defend those people's innocence in any way possible, but if they cannot do it without any danger of being led back to torture again, then they cannot and will not do it, even if it is a matter of their own salvation.

Thus torture subverted utterly the cure of souls, and Spee's concerns were more spiritually fundamental than, as Harris would have it, only the 'insanity' of relying on torture to prosecute an illusory crime. He was indeed acutely aware of the impossible situation that the accused in Germany found themselves in, but his horror at it was inseparable from the religious understanding that told him he saw his community riven by Satan. 'The enemy of the human race has found a completely open door to inflict slaughter on innocent people', he declared, '[f]or it will be within his and his followers' power to overwhelm anyone at all with denunciations...Could even he fashion for himself a more convenient way of raging and causing harm throughout Germany?'<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Spee's critique was formed not in spite of his faith, but because of it. He was an opponent of witch-hunting, not because he was possessed of a rationality more like ours, but because he, quite literally, thought it was the work of the Devil.

We should not doubt that expressing opposition to witch-hunting was potentially dangerous, nor should we underestimate the courage of those who were driven to combat the abuses they saw around them, be they motivated by ‘science’ or by faith. There were many ways in which the vengeance of the witch-hunters could be exacted; from condemnation in print to demotion or lack of preferment, to intimidation and, occasionally, arrest. The Catholic professor of theology, Cornelius Loos, who, unlike Flade, certainly did take a public stand in Trier, was forced to confess his anti-witch-hunting heretical in front of the papal nuncio at Brussels in March 1593.<sup>36</sup> The Dutch theologian, Balthasar Bekker, in *The World Bewitched* (1691) went so far as to render the Devil almost entirely powerless. Bekker refused on several occasions to recant his ‘errors’, was suspended from the ministry and, ultimately, ejected from the Reformed Church. One of his most vociferous supporters, Eric Walten, was arrested for blasphemy and died in jail awaiting trial.<sup>37</sup>

But no case is any less nuanced than the those outlined here, and understanding them properly always involves clearing away the mire of rationalist hagiography. As with those who engaged with or opposed atomism, those who stood out against witch-hunting were complex human beings embroiled in their relationship to time and place. They took seriously their rationalism and their religion, whilst they manoeuvred within a politics that could be brutal, but was often deeply subtle. And they were men of temperament; some gentle and compassionate, some arrogant and supercilious. We again do them a disservice when we reduce them to one-dimensional caricatures in an exemplar tale.

Rationalism is entitled to its heroes, but not to its myths of heroism. The claims to heroism of such a mindset are simply diminished by the kind of historical cavalierism displayed by Sam Harris. Encountering the stories of the opponents of witch-hunting in the venerable works of rationalist polemic, he seems unable to conceive that these may be constructs or that they may have been revised, and even rejected, at some point during the 177 years of scholarship that have followed Mackay, the 122 years that have followed White or the eighty-three years that have followed Russell. When an old orthodoxy suits, an old orthodoxy will clearly do. The real freethinker was Burr, who was prepared to do what the great historian of rationalism was not. He rejected the simplistic tradition in favour of the complexities revealed by the evidence and, with no lessening of his sympathy, concluded that ‘Dietrich Flade was not a

martyr – scarcely even a hero. Little as we know of him, it is clear he died for something less than a principle.’<sup>38</sup>

## NOTES

1. *TEoF*, 90.
2. Ibid. Harris is quoting from Russell, *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 1st ed. 1935), 95.
3. George Lincoln Burr, *The Fate of Dietrich Flade* (New York: G. P. Putnams, 1891).
4. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, I, 356–357.
5. George Lincoln Burr, *A Witch-Hunter in the Book Shops* (n.p., 1902), 1 (unpaginated).
6. Burr, *The Fate of Dietrich Flade*, 3–4.
7. Ibid., 25.
8. Ibid., 28.
9. Ibid., 29–32.
10. Ibid., 32–38.
11. Ibid., 38.
12. Ibid., 39–40.
13. Ibid., 40–44.
14. This was *De confessionibus maleficorum et sagarum* (*Of the Confessions of Warlocks and Witches*) published in 1589.
15. Ibid., 47–49.
16. Ibid., 51.
17. White, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, I, 356–357.
18. Ibid., 357.
19. Russell, *Religion and Science*, 95.
20. Ibid.
21. *TEoF*, 90; the quote is not taken from Spee directly, but from Paul Johnson’s, *A History of Christianity* (London, 1976), 311. A modern English translation of Spee’s book is available, see Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld, *Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials*, trans. Marcus Hellyer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).
22. *TEoF*, 90.
23. Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, 450–451.
24. For a detailed account of Spee’s career and the problems with the contextualisation of *Cautio Criminalis* see Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, viii–xvi.
25. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy*, I, 96–97; Leibniz to André Morell, 10 December 1696, trans. Lloyd Strickland, 2007.

26. Hellyer makes the case for Paderborn and Westphalia as the location of Spee's involvement in executions for witchcraft, *Cautio Criminalis*, xvi.
27. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, I, 97.
28. Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, xxix–xxxii.
29. *Ibid.*, xxii–xxvi.
30. *Ibid.*, 73.
31. *Ibid.*, 74–75.
32. For a discussion of the demonological conservatism of Spee and a number of other opponents of witch hunting see Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 205–208.
33. Spee, *Cautio Criminalis*, 15–19, 113.
34. *Ibid.*, 40–41.
35. *Ibid.*, 178.
36. Lea, *Materials*, 601–604; unsurprisingly, White placed an account of Loos suffering alongside that of Flade's, see *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, I, 356; for a nuanced analysis of the case see H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 63–64; for a recent restatement see Gary K. Waite, *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 125–128.
37. For a rationalist celebration of Bekker, see Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680–1715* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, 1st ed. 1935), trans. J. Lewis May, 202. For a modern study, see Andrew Fix, *Fallen Angels: Balthasar Bekker, Spirit Belief, and Confessionalism in the Seventeenth Century Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999); for the Walten case see Wiep van Bunge, 'Eric Walten (1663–1697): An Early Enlightenment Radical in the Dutch Republic', in Wiep van Bunge and Wim Klever (eds.), *Disguised and Overt Spinozism Around 1700: Papers Presented at the International Colloquium, Held at Rotterdam, 5–8 October, 1994* (Leiden, 1996), 41–54.
38. Burr, *The Fate of Dietrich Flade*, 57.

## The Innocence of Atheism

What matters is not whether Hitler and Stalin were atheists, but whether atheism systematically *influences* people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does.

...why would anyone go to war for the sake of an *absence* of belief?  
(Richard Dawkins)<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, noted, in a speech to the British House of Lords, that the Nazi and communist tyrannies were ‘examples where the absence of true religion, and the abandonment of basic moral values anchored in it, helped to make genocide both possible and, shamefully, acceptable.’ Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, speaking in response to Richard Dawkins in 2008, highlighted what he saw as the ‘danger’ of reason without faith. The regimes of Hitler and Stalin, he argued, testify to the likely nature of a polity of untrammelled reason: ‘a God-free zone...ruled by reason, and where does it lead? It leads to terror and oppression.’<sup>2</sup>

The exasperation of the New Atheists with this argument is palpable and entirely justified. Most broadly, it supposes that mankind is so innately corrupt that a lurking murderous impulse can only be kept subdued by the moral strictures of religion. Only religion can provide a truly protective sense of the sanctity of life, with all humans taken to be the inviolable creations of God. Atheism, it assumes, offers the hubristic myth of moral self-sufficiency, and it allows for people to be seen merely as objects to be manipulated and, if necessary, destroyed in pursuit of

worldly goals. Knowing that all humans are sinful, the religious understand the need for a moral yoke. Thus moral superiority comes not from being intrinsically more good, but from being more vigilant precisely because you know your potential to be bad. In the words of Dawkins' Presbyterian opponent, David Robertson: 'All of us live inconsistently with our creeds. However, in Christianity there are brakes, checks and balances and it does not appear immediately obvious that this is the case with atheism.'<sup>3</sup> Atheists, then, are invited to see in history's genocidal fanatics a grotesque version of themselves—what they could so easily become without religion's steadying hand.

Unsurprisingly, the New Atheists find this deeply ironic. How can the religious presume to lecture others on the dangers of bigotry and claim that their moralism might act as a bulwark against intolerance? Where was this bulwark in Bosnia and Rwanda, in Israel and Palestine, in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria...? It should not, Michel Onfray insists, be 'if God does not exist, then everything is permitted', but 'because God exists, everything is permitted.'<sup>4</sup> There is also a more personal irony to the theist argument which causes the New Atheists no small measure of delight. Hitchens quotes a Bishop unable to understand why atheists 'do not lead a life of unbridled immorality.' Does this not, he reasonably suggests, reveal more about the Bishop's state of mind than the atheist's? What are you admitting about yourself, asks Dawkins, when you accept that you need 'divine surveillance'?<sup>5</sup>

But beyond this the New Atheists seek to exempt atheism from all suspicion. Religion systematically teaches the faithful to be narrow-minded, bigoted and ultimately violent. Atheism, they claim, systematises none of these things. Put bluntly, atheism simply does not kill.

To hold up Hitler and Stalin as the epitome of atheist iniquity is, it is claimed, to miss the fundamental point. The dictators may indeed have been atheists (although in the case of Hitler that must be disputed) but it simply does not follow that their crimes were motivated by their lack of belief. Even in those cases in which the targeted persecution of believers might seem obvious, the impression is illusory. On closer inspection, the 'real' agenda behind such atrocities will turn out to be political and economic. 'The bottom line of the Stalin/Hitler debating point is very simple', Dawkins argues: 'Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, a circular argument avoids any possibility of censure. Since atheism cannot motivate persecution, persecution must evidence the lack of atheism in the perpetrator's



motivation. The history of atheism is the history of innocence, and the history of atheist innocence, in turn, tells us much about the moral superiority of atheism.

The argument is based on two assumptions. The first is that atheism cannot drive people to oppress others because only ideology can do that, and atheism, by its very nature, is an *absence* of ideology. No one oppresses another in the name of what they do *not* believe. 'From the mere fact that one is an atheist', Keith Parsons notes, 'very little else can be inferred...Atheism, whether it is taken as the claim that belief in God is false or incoherent or unjustified, just does not have sufficient content to constitute a worldview'.<sup>7</sup> By the same logic, *fundamentalist* atheism is, in the words of A. C. Grayling, akin to 'sleeping furiously'.<sup>8</sup>

Second, it is assumed that, because of its reliance on rational evidentialism, atheism is most likely to be an antidote to prejudice and absolutism rather than an encouragement. Those atheists who indulge such tendencies have abandoned their rationality and in doing so have effectively ceased to be true atheists. Thus Sam Harris points out that the regimes so often used to caricature atheist tyranny were, in fact, built around 'litanies of delusion' concerning race or economics; they were 'cultic and irrational' and, ultimately, little more than religions by another name.<sup>9</sup> At the moment that atheism ceases to be rational, it becomes something other than atheism, and so, conveniently, it becomes someone else's problem.

The first argument is only partly correct. Ideologies are *answers* to the questions of why our world is the way it is and how we might make it better. Atheism is not akin to these because, when it is an answer, it is an answer to a different question—the metaphysical question of the nature of existence. There is, atheism concludes, insufficient evidence to merit believing in a spiritual realm. As Parsons suggests, there is not enough here for a worldview. But politically, sociologically, culturally, even biologically, atheism is no longer an answer but a *question*. If there is no God, why has mankind been so disposed to believe in one? If so much of our lives have been shaped by an unreality, has this been beneficial or harmful? How far are we obligated to reshape our cultures in line with scientific naturalism, and is continued supernaturalism now a barrier to human well-being? The metaphysical conclusion of atheism has always been a trigger to sociological, cultural and political analysis—it makes almost unavoidable the development of a viewpoint on these issues.

In this sense, it seems perverse to deny that atheism offers a proposition around which a sense of the world, what it is and what it should be, is arranged. If atheism raises questions, there is no reason why the answers should not become ideological. It is true that from the fact of atheism no *specific* understanding even of the nature of religion and its role in society can be automatically inferred. But it is an entirely reasonable inference that an atheist will have *a position* on these issues, well formed or otherwise.

If there is no God then the atheist must ask what follows. For some, quite logically, a principle that human beings ought then to live their lives in accordance with this reality. If there is no God, what do we make of the fact that so many have been killed in His name? For some, religion must be understood not only as a mistake but as an evil. What of the fact that faith has absorbed so much of our physical, economic and psychological resources? Some will conclude that this has been a wholly negative diversion of our energies, and that faith must be considered a barrier to human flourishing. What of the apparent tendency of religion towards moral, political and social conservatism? For some, it is a clear indication that religion is a tool of social control that bolsters exploitative hierarchies. If there is no God, can religion offer us a single insight grounded in reality? Some will think it surely cannot, and that its cultural dominance stifles other discourses by which we might learn more. Thus, for some atheists, the position of non-belief leads quite logically to conclusions about the nature of religion that lead equally logically to the wish that humanity might be freed of it.

Those more strident still can follow the path by which wish becomes ambition, and those most militant of all can see the need for change as so imperative that it must be forced upon the world.

The atheism of such militants would not be lessened by the fact that their anti-religion might be incorporated within other political and social ideologies. A Communist atheist remains an atheist, and may act on the understanding that atheism is integral to their socialism. Their critique of faith is familiar even through the Red hue of their broader ideology. Yet the New Atheists refuse even to ask whether such a version of atheism might have motivated the oppression of believers in Stalin's Russia or Mao's China. Instead, they take refuge in the apparently intuitive conclusion that atheism cannot drive persecution. Atheist oppression, then, becomes a contradiction in terms and a non-phenomenon unworthy of pursuing.

From this follows a certain implicit self-assurance of moral superiority. Most of the New Atheists are careful to acknowledge that atheism does not automatically *make* someone more moral. Yet they confidently assert that atheists *have* been more moral, more tolerant, more concerned with human flourishing for its own sake. A number of assumptions seem to interact. One is that those already of a rational, open-minded and progressive disposition will be naturally drawn to atheism, both as the only metaphysics that can satisfy their instinctive evidentialism and as the means to diagnose what has so retarded the fulfilment of human potential. Another is that atheism itself naturally undermines the false certainties through which humans separate themselves into hierarchies of worth and so impose inequalities upon each other. With no way of living taken as divinely ordained, non-belief frees us to always see the human being first and to respond accordingly.

Without doubt atheists often provide a living repudiation of at least the most extreme theist caricature of the consequences of non-belief. Atheist claims to tolerance, rationality and evidentialism are not unfounded, and the contribution of the critique of religion to the development of freedom of conscience and human rights must be acknowledged. But if these assertions of moral fitness at first appear relatively moderate, they become markedly less so when the existence of any darker side to atheism is simply denied. With no other side of the coin even acknowledged as a possibility, benevolence becomes the defining quality of atheism.

In two significant ways this is a denial of history. First, the oppression of believers by atheists, and in the name of atheism itself, is simply a historical fact. In a number of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, the forced, and often violent, eradication of religion was pursued as an entirely explicit goal. Such regimes saw faith as one of the most powerful barriers to (in their terms) positive social change, and they saw atheism as a defining characteristic of the 'perfected' societies they aimed to create. But if totalitarianism was where such ambitions gained real power, the advocacy of political atheism—even violent forms—could be found more widely.<sup>10</sup> Modern atheists cannot simply choose to be blind to this history on the basis of a range of dubious get-out clauses. In what follows, we will look in detail at the disputed example of Soviet Russia, a case study in which we find that, yet again, the claims of the New Atheism run counter to the findings of historians working on the subject.

Second, the presumption of atheist rationalism and benevolence creates an artificial barrier between the New Atheism and the potential for historically informed self-reflection.<sup>11</sup> History has much to tell us about the potentially negative and damaging consequences of claims to monopolies on truth and the ideological tribalism they produce, even if, as we have repeatedly seen, the interaction of these with political and social contexts must always be understood. The New Atheism, however, is to be exempted from having any such insights applied to it. The entire history of the human susceptibility to prejudice, intolerance, moral panic and ideological violence can have nothing in the way of caution to offer it, or be the basis of any examination of its polemic. Yet the New Atheism is rife with such parallels, some of which are deeply ironic, and are disguised only by the presumption that, because it *is* atheism its assertions must be rational, evidentially grounded and, ultimately, benign.

In the final chapters of the book, these issues are explored. First through an examination of an extreme, but instructive case: Sam Harris' advocacy of torture on the basis that the (atheist) rational mind can determine its appropriate use where the deranged religious mind could not. Second, we will look at the consequences for their political and social agenda of the New Atheists' refusal to acknowledge any darker side to atheist history. Since they do not believe that atheism has ever led to oppression, or could share any of the absolutist and exclusivist characters of religion, they see no need to temper their rhetoric or define their goals so as to guard against it.

## NOTES

1. *TGD*, 309, 316, author's emphases.
2. George Carey, Speech to the house of Lords, Debate: 'Religion and International Order', October 15, 1999 ([http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199899/ldhansrd/vo991015/text/91015-01.htm#91015-01\\_snew0](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld199899/ldhansrd/vo991015/text/91015-01.htm#91015-01_snew0)); Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, interview, *Today*, 9 May 2008 (BBC, Radio 4).
3. David Robertson, *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2007), 96.
4. *IDoA*, 41–43.
5. *GiNG*, 185–6; *TDG*, 259.

6. Ibid., 315.
7. Keith M. Parsons, 'Atheism: Twilight or Dawn?', in Stewart, *The Future of Atheism*, 55.
8. A. C. Grayling, interview with Decca Aitkenhead, 'How can you be a militant atheist? It's like sleeping furiously.', *Guardian*, 3 April 2011 (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/03/grayling-good-book-atheism-philosophy>).
9. *TEoF*, 79, 231.
10. For example see John Stenhouse, 'Imperialism, Atheism and Race: Charles Southwell, Old Corruption and the Maori', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 44 (4) (2005), 754–774.
11. Some dismiss the notion of the lessons of history as a trite cliché, and it must certainly be treated with caution, for the situations of the past are never repeated exactly. Yet to deny that parallels can be discerned between the historical and modern experiences of humans is to deny what is obvious. The past may indeed be another country, but it is not another planet.



## The Hostile Utopia: Atheist Oppression and the Assault on Religion in the USSR

Solzhenitsyn tells the story of an atrocity that occurred in 1930 in the Solovetsky labour camp on the White Sea. Imprisoned on account of their religion were a group of sectarians who believed (as many did) that the Soviet state was Antichrist, and that they were forbidden to carry its documents or to sign any of its paperwork. Against the suffocating bureaucracy of the revolutionary state this gave them little to hope for. The camp authorities decided to abandon the sectarians on a small island, Maly Zayatsky, a ‘sandy, unforested desert’ containing little more than a fisherman’s hut. They would be provided with rations in two monthly instalments, but only on the condition that every individual member of the group sign a single invoice. They refused and so were exiled with no food. Two months later, when camp bureaucracy demanded that they be required to each sign for their next instalment of rations, the entire group was found starved to death on Maly Zayatsky.<sup>1</sup>

How are we to interpret such a story in the light of the debate as to the nature of Soviet anti-religion? For theists, it will no doubt appear as one of appalling victimisation. New Atheists would agree, but their logic would also demand that the sectarians themselves also be condemned for suicidal intransigence in this clash of two absolutisms. Totalitarianism’s cruel bureaucratic demand for subjection met the religious willingness to suffer a terrible death rather than sign a sheet of paper. Only a blind faith in heaven and the virtue of martyrdom could have moved them to conspire in their own murder.<sup>2</sup> Surely, then, the one thing the story does

not suggest is that atheism itself bore any responsibility for the deaths of these people?

When the historical context of such atrocities is examined, that conclusion appears far less straightforward. Take another story, this time told by a Russian émigré in Munich to a researcher from the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System in December 1950. In comparison with Maly Zayatsky, it will appear mundane. But it is this perhaps that makes it more revealing.

Thirty-two years old when interviewed, the respondent, a railroad official, had been brought up in a strongly Orthodox family. Their lives were characterised by the furtiveness that became the norm of religious observance in the Soviet state. The family continued to celebrate Christmas and Easter secretly despite the considerable dangers of doing so ('even if you came to work with liquor on your breath on the first day of Christmas, you could be arrested because you were not supposed to celebrate it in any way'). If religious festivals offered believers a way of maintaining their identity, they were also a natural focus of Communist surveillance. In his fifth year at school, the railroad worker's teacher asked the class who would be celebrating Easter. Naively ('foolishly') the child raised his hand and so incriminated himself and his family. When it was also discovered that he had brought a painted Easter egg to school, a scandal erupted. His parents were summoned and followed the only course available to diffuse the situation—they lied, claiming that they had no knowledge of their son's religious activities. If this spared them closer attention from the authorities it did so at the cost of the continuing humiliation of their child. His superstition was made an example of for the amusement of his classmates. 'In school', he remembered, 'we had a wall newspaper, and in it, they had a caricature of me with a red Easter egg.'<sup>3</sup>

What makes the story significant is that it illustrates the nature of the everyday anti-religious environment the Communists wished to create. Arrest and exile were the *culmination* of the experience of persecution for a minority of believers. For most the challenge of living with the regime's atheist ambitions resided in the mundane settings of family, school and work. New Atheists take advantage of the fluctuations in Soviet policy to suggest that the atheism of the regime was somehow not real: the Soviet state failed to eradicate religious belief, it sought to inculcate its own secular cultism and it compromised with the established Churches when it was advantageous to do so. But these were

consequences of atheism being removed from its more normal abstract philosophical setting and programmed within a specific political context that was both absolutist and experimental. The regime always saw the creation of socialism and the eradication of supernaturalism as synonymous. Again and again, it expressed its frustration at the tenacity of belief and its answer was most often repressive. Through attacks on the institutional Churches, and through the 'enlightenment' of the people—a mixture of positive education in scientific materialism and the ridiculing of superstition—religion would be deculturated from the Soviet community. Believers were to understand this. For them, the socialist state was intended to be a very hostile utopia.

### THE SOVIET ASSAULT ON RELIGION

On 23 January 1918, three months after the Bolsheviks seized power, Church and state in Russia were formally separated, and religious belief was relegated largely to the private sphere. The process had begun in October 1917, when all Church and monastic land was made subject to nationalisation by the Bolsheviks' Land Decree. The churches themselves were deprived of their legal status and their property made subject to confiscation. Congregations now had to lease their church buildings back from the state. Once the Church lost its material base, Marxian orthodoxy predicted, it would simply collapse.<sup>4</sup> From December 1917, only civil marriages were to be legally recognised, and the separation decree of January 1918 banned religious education in schools. Private religious education was permitted but, after June 1921, only to people above the age of eighteen.<sup>5</sup> The punishment for the teaching of religion to minors was one year's forced labour.

Along with the dismantling of the Orthodox Church, the priesthood was to be fair game for communist aggression, a new social reality signalled by their legal ostracism under the new constitution of July 1918. The clergy were now categorised with other identified exploiters ('capitalists, merchants, former members of the police, criminals, and imbeciles') who were to be denied the full rights of citizenship.<sup>6</sup> Enshrining labour as a duty, and thus condemning as parasites those who contributed none, the constitution denied the clergy the right to vote or to be elected to the Soviets. Church dues were criminalised, yet priests were banned from the Communist Party and so from civil service employment, and banned also from the trades unions through which access to



work on state projects could be gained. At the same time, they were to pay higher rents and taxes than proletarian citizens. As the Bolsheviks intended it, it was not only the institution of the Church that should wither and die through the denial of resources.

The raids by which Church property was claimed for the people more often resembled looting than ordered confiscations, and they easily escalated into bloodshed, or provoked judicial executions, when they were resisted.<sup>7</sup> In four months early in 1918, according to Communist Party sources, 687 people died whilst taking part in religious processions that were attacked or whilst defending their churches. On 7 February 1918, Vladimir, the Metropolitan of Kiev, was tortured and killed by five drunken Red Army soldiers.<sup>8</sup> This became the most notorious example of mob violence against the priesthood, but it was only one of many such cases involving hierarchs and parish priests, the true numbers of which are unknown.<sup>9</sup> Priests also fell under the remit of the political police, the Cheka (formed in December 1917), which soon had dedicated central and local sections to focus on religion. The special role accorded to the Cheka is evidenced by the presence of one of their officers on each *troika*<sup>10</sup> created to enforce the decree on the separation of Church and state.<sup>11</sup> The various incarnations of the secret police (GPU, NKVD, KGB) would continue to pursue religious 'criminals' up to the fall of the Soviet Union.

The expropriation campaign of 1922 saw the early regime's most concerted assault on the Church. In the summer of 1921, famine struck the lower Volga and the Ukraine. Trotsky and Lenin saw an opportunity to provoke the Church into open resistance. All churches would be required to surrender their valuables for the purpose of famine relief, an order Patriarch Tikhon was sure to refuse since to do so would entail the sacrilege of giving up consecrated vessels used in worship. In early February 1922, Tikhon offered to surrender non-consecrated treasures and to equal the value of the consecrated by raising money through voluntary subscriptions. The offer was refused and on 23 February, a decree was issued instructing local Soviets to remove all precious objects from churches within one month.<sup>12</sup> Extensive violence accompanied the campaign, and in March, in Shuia, a textile manufacturing centre northeast of Moscow, a stand-off left one Red Army soldier critically injured and several protesters dead.<sup>13</sup> The regime could now present resistance to the expropriation campaign as a counter-revolutionary plot. It was, Lenin wrote, precisely when 'people are eating human flesh' and 'corpses are

littering the roads', that the Church's hold on the people might be broken. Here was a unique opportunity to 'smash the enemy.'<sup>14</sup> The Shuia prosecutions were the first of the regime's show trials. Eight priests and three laity were executed, and twenty-five others imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> The expropriation campaign continued, as did the violence and the show trials. Perhaps as many as 8100 clergy and religious were killed in the conflict over church valuables.<sup>16</sup>

The early attack on the Church set the tone and style of anti-religious persecution thereafter, but its intensity fluctuated widely with the regime's constantly changing priorities. A lull in the mid-1920s was followed by a newly concerted assault under Stalin's cultural revolution. In April 1929, a new law on religious organisations limited still further their few freedoms, and discrimination against priests was extended. They were to be evicted from all nationalised housing 'without being offered alternative living space.'<sup>17</sup> When rationing was introduced in the same year, they were among those given food at starvation levels or denied ration cards altogether. Extensive anti-religious violence and discrimination accompanied the collectivisation drive that began in late 1929, with thousands of churches being closed and priests being exiled and executed. Yet following this, the assault was temporarily relaxed. The new Soviet Constitution of 1936 removed a number of the discriminatory provisions of its 1918 predecessor. The state, Stalin argued, having liquidated the exploiting classes, could now remove discriminations that had only been intended to be temporary.<sup>18</sup> The distinction between working and non-working persons was abolished and priests were no longer to be disenfranchised. Article 124 guaranteed 'freedom of religious worship.' Albeit religious 'propaganda' continued to be illegal, traditional modes of religious expression, such as lighting Christmas trees, were once more tolerated and propaganda campaigns likely to offend believers' sensibilities were wound down.<sup>19</sup> In response, some clergy began to sermonise in favour of the regime.<sup>20</sup> But the religious proved too enthusiastic in pursuing their new opportunities. They demanded the reopening of churches and the reinstitution of their processions, and disturbingly large numbers attended Easter services in 1937.<sup>21</sup> The census of January 1937 was suppressed, apparently because it uncovered a surprisingly high number of Soviet citizens now willing to describe themselves as believers. Most worrying of all, the election campaign of that year revealed that the religious intended to take their re-enfranchisement seriously, to the apparent surprise of the regime. Taking advantage of the rules that

allowed any legally constituted group to propose candidates, believers made attempts to put clergy forward, forcing the regime to clamp down on its own regulations.<sup>22</sup> The outright assault on the religion was renewed. In November, mass arrests of clergy and believers, on charges of insurgency and sabotage, were carried out, and the religious featured prominently in the closing stages of the Yezhovshchina, the wave of show trials conducted by Stalin's notorious Commissar of Internal Affairs. The charges explicitly equated taking advantage of article 124 with counter-revolution.<sup>23</sup> Another wave of church closures reduced the number of Orthodox houses of worship to 4200 by 1941.

### ONLY ANTI-CLERICALISM?

...the long association of religion with corrupt secular power has meant that most nations have to go through at least one anti-clerical phase, from Henry VIII through Cromwell to the French Revolution to the Risorgimento, and in the conditions of warfare and collapse that obtained in Russia and China these interludes were exceptionally brutal ones.<sup>24</sup>

Christopher Hitchens does not deny that a bloody campaign was waged against the Church in the wake of the October Revolution. Nor does he deny that Lenin and Trotsky were atheists who 'believed that illusions in religion could be destroyed by acts of policy.' But, he tells us, the two things were not connected. Rather the assault on the Orthodox Church was Russia's inevitable bout of anti-clericalism, a stage all nations '*have to go through*' if their monarchical autocracies are to be dismantled. Anti-clericalism is the natural response to the intransigent conservatism often displayed by Churches and to their tendency to act as a pillar of the repressive state. As such, politics rather than atheism should be understood as its driving force. Indeed, Hitchens clearly had some sympathy with the policy of anti-clericalism if not its violent excesses. The Russian Orthodox Church had been 'the main prop of the tsarist autocracy', the 'protector of serfdom', 'the author of anti-Jewish pogroms' and 'obscenely rich.' Whatever the appalling record of Soviet communism, 'no serious Christian ought to hope for the restoration of religion *as it was*' before 1917.<sup>25</sup> Hector Avalos, in *Fighting Words*, is equally dismissive of atheist violence in Soviet Russia. He accepts that 'many anti-religious policies...can reasonably be attributed to [Stalin's] atheism', and 'can indeed be reduced to the form: "I do not believe in God, therefore I am

committing violent act X.” But for all that, Stalin was ‘primarily political rather than atheistic.’ Forced industrialisation and the collectivisation of agriculture were responsible for the millions of deaths inflicted by the regime in the 1930s, not anti-religion.<sup>26</sup> Similar claims are to be found in other New Atheist texts.<sup>27</sup>

But Hitchens’ approach fails to differentiate between forms of anti-clericalism. Certainly, we find it in a wide number of revolutionary contexts but, put simply, there is a great difference between religious anti-clericalism and atheist anti-clericalism. Whilst assaults on clergy will naturally focus on similar targets—notions of hierarchy, customs of deference, clerical status symbols, Church wealth and so on—what these attacks express can be fundamentally distinct. Does the clergy offend because it becomes a barrier to the true worship of God? Or, does it offend because it encourages the worship of a God who isn’t there? We have already seen that many of the early medieval heretics were, in fact, anti-clerical radicals who aimed, through the destruction of a ‘corrupt’ Church hierarchy, to realise the ideals of their faith. Similarly, if we look at the English Civil War, an example cited by Hitchens, we do find a deep-seated anti-clericalism at the heart of the parliamentarians’ reformist agenda. Appalled by what they took to be the crypto-popery of Charles I’s regime, they aimed to strip away all vestiges of Catholicism from the English Church. They abolished the episcopacy in 1642, beheaded its leader in 1645, and attempted a wider clerical purge under the Committees for Scandalous Ministers. Yet, the aim was always the spiritual and political renewal of the clergy, not its destruction. Indeed, most anti-clerical episodes have been reformist rather than abolitionist. The Bolshevik case was not. They did not intend that religion should survive in the Communist state and they understood the removal of the clergy to be the first step in the process of its eradication. In downplaying the distinction between religious and atheist anti-clericalism, Hitchens robs both of their real meaning.

Meaning is also lost to atheist persecution in Avalos’ discussion, even as he accepts the reality of the phenomenon. Ignoring entirely the attack on religion before 1929, and downplaying it as a tangential aspect of Stalinist violence thereafter, he avoids discussing it in all but the most cursory fashion. Insomuch as it exists, atheist persecution is simply not important enough to merit serious discussion. In a book which sets out to provide a general theory of religious violence, this is a notable omission, for atheist persecution must be understood as violence *in response to*

*religion*. As we have seen, Avalos believes that religion is especially prone to encouraging violence because it artificially creates scarce resources to be fought over—inscripturation, sacred space, group privileging and salvation.<sup>28</sup> If this is so, how should we theorise the motivation among some atheists to obliterate sacred space altogether or to kill inscripturators? For all its reality is acknowledged, atheist violence is passed over by Avalos in a couple of sentences and so is exempted from theorisation. It apparently has no meaning worth discussing.

Somewhat ironically the New Atheists are not the only ones to deprive atheist violence in the Soviet Union of any real meaning. The most common theist approach swamps the attack on the Church within an undifferentiated mass of Soviet killing all of which is to be laid at the door of atheism. '[I]n the first half of the twentieth century', Keith Ward notes, 'Communist, explicitly anti-religious, policies were responsible for millions of deaths...It is estimated that in the USSR, twenty million people were killed...' For Dinesh D'Souza, Stalin's death toll—again 'around twenty million'—was one of 'the really big crimes that have been committed by atheist groups and governments.' Vox Day offers the statistic of 61,911,000 Soviet murders on the atheist conscience between 1917 and 1987.<sup>29</sup> But in using such figures the role of atheism as a *motivator* of specific acts of violence is actually downplayed in preference for a much broader and nebulous claim that it *facilitated* all Soviet persecution regardless of the terms in which the perpetrators chose to see their own behaviour. The Soviets, these theists are arguing, may have wished to kill each other for any number of reasons, but the condition that allowed those desires to be turned into action was the absence of the moral constraints once provided by religion's demand that humans be accountable to a higher power. Atheism, then, was not so much the engine of Soviet violence as it was the factor ensuring that the brake would never be applied.

It is this moralising agenda—the need for Soviet persecution to provide a salutary lesson in favour of the moral yoke of religion—that seems to account for the curious lack of interest these writers display in actual cases of violence carried out in the name of atheism. No attempt is made to deconstruct or give meaning to the targeted attacks on religion in the Soviet Union and no useful categorisation of atheist persecution emerges from this polemic. But perhaps that is the point. The omission is convenient for the theist case, for defining precisely what forms of violence

constitute atheist persecution involves, as its unavoidable corollary, acknowledging what forms of violence do not.<sup>30</sup>

Soviet violence towards religion was never only anti-clericalism, just as the persecution of the industrial and agricultural populations was never only economic. Nor was it a manifestation only of some ill-defined atheist anti-morality. Rather it must be understood within the context that gave it meaning: that is, the Bolshevik attitude to the dangers of supernaturalism and their determination that it should occupy no place in the socialist utopia they intended to create.

### THE SOVIET 'NEW MAN' AND THE END OF RELIGION

The Soviet project was aesthetic, and understood society as an artefact to be refashioned. It would be purified, and the ugly distortions of capitalism and bourgeois individualism replaced by the beauty of rational collectivism and scientism. Integral to this was the banishing of all forms of supernaturalism. Marx believed religion to be a solace-giving illusion born of early humans' fear of nature and of each other. As society developed it was turned into a tool for social control, the promise of heaven being offered as compensation for acquiescing to the earthly status quo.<sup>31</sup> 'Religion', Lenin declared, 'is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.'<sup>32</sup> The hope of the exploited classes lay instead in materialism. It would allow them to see through the myths by which they had been controlled, but it offered something more. In materialism lay the possibility of the rational and scientific understanding of society, and from that came the opportunity for its best, even its perfect refashioning.

Such a society required New Men and New Women who would themselves embody rationalism, collectivism, scientism and atheism. In time they would be bred from future generations, but for the present, they were to be forged out of the raw material of the living population. It was a declaration of the sheer transformatory power of the revolutionary project.<sup>33</sup> Thus Trotsky claimed: 'We can construct a railway across the Sahara, we can build the Eiffel Tower and talk directly with New York, but we surely cannot improve man. No, we can! To produce a new, "improved version" of man—that is the future task of Communism.'<sup>34</sup> Today this no doubt rings with hubris, and the New Atheists may perhaps read in it the inflated irrationalism that they see as fatal to the

revolution's claims to true atheism. Yet, such ambitions were a logical consequence of the Bolshevik understanding of the nature of cultural change. In the words of historian, William Husband, they understood culture 'not as something manifested but as something attained..., one achieved a level of culture and tried to impart it to others.'<sup>35</sup> In Bolshevik terms, one achieved atheism and sought then to impart it to others.

The pursuit of Soviet state aesthetics was a two-sided process of social interventionism and state violence. Work and welfare programmes sought to realise and so inculcate ideals about collectivism in an ordered and productive socialist community.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, population and culture would be shaped by excision. From its earliest days, the historian of Soviet violence, Peter Holquist, argues, the regime sought to know intimately the state of the raw material from which it intended to sculpt its new reality. The use of detailed questionnaires, of national censuses (1926, 1937 and 1939) and of 'passportization' in 1932, allowed for the cataloguing of individuals relative to the state's aims for social transformation, and so provided the framework for the correction or filtration of obstructing elements. State violence and discrimination actualised the social sculpting implied in categorisation. Those elements considered irredeemable could be shot, sent to die in the Gulag or exiled. The rest were to be reformed by corrective labour (in the same Gulag) as a prelude to their reintroduction into society as reconstituted socialists. So central was the aesthetic rationale that Holquist suggests that Soviet violence might best be described as a 'technique' for the realisation of societal beauty.<sup>37</sup>

Both sides of this process were reflected in the Soviet pursuit of atheism. The restructuring of society would be a lesson in the power of materialism over those natural and social conditions the fear of which had given birth to supernaturalism. Religion would disappear with the emergence of a society that was truly scientifically organised and provisioned—after all, there would no longer be any such fears to express. Thus, state provision of healthcare, of constant work, of mechanisation and electrification, of railroads and even new cities were all intended to demonstrate that the power of materialism far exceeded the petty miracles promised to the faithful. At the same time, the regime would seek to excise those ugly and dangerous religious elements that undermined the Soviet project by their very presence. It would excise church buildings, their paraphernalia, their clergy, and the most active supporters of

religion, just as it sought to excise capitalists, tsarists, Cossacks and other categories of people deemed too dangerous to be tolerated.

But there existed significant programmatic differences with regard to atheisation itself. A more passive strand held that religion would simply evaporate in the heat of revolutionary change.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Lenin believed that the work of human refashioning could begin only after religious attachment had been actively destroyed—atheisation as ‘catharsis for awakening revolutionary souls.’<sup>39</sup> Ranged against both was the ‘God-building’ of the Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatoli Lunacharsky. Religion, he argued, expressed a desire for transcendence which the revolution should seek to harness.<sup>40</sup> It instilled communitarianism and drove individual and collective aspiration, and if humanity itself could replace God as the focus of religion this would be the best means of inculcating atheism in the new socialist men and women.<sup>41</sup> God-building caused bitter divisions among Communists both before and after the Revolution, and it was never Soviet policy. But quasi-religious cultures would develop in the Red holidays and ceremonials (baptism, marriage, funeral), and in the cultic celebration of mechanisation and scientism.<sup>42</sup>

The fluctuations in Bolshevik anti-religion were also, however, the product of the experience of the campaign itself. The regime fatally underestimated the strength of people’s attachment to religion, believing that it was sustained by nothing more than habit and the cultural power of the Church. The stubborn resilience of supernaturalism was a constant source of frustration and strategic introspection for anti-religious agitators. Frustrating also was the organisational chaos that beset atheisation as it did so many of the early regime’s ambitions, and the periodic neglect of the programme that set in when the government chose to concentrate on other priorities. So, as with so many aspects the Communists found both intolerable and tenacious, religion was subject to not to a uniform and consistent attack, but to regular ‘drives’ cyclically reasserting the determination to eradicate belief and inculcate atheism.

The 1918 separation decree defined the Soviet state as non-religious only, not anti-religious.<sup>43</sup> In that sense, it accorded with the ideas of the more passively expectant strand of Bolshevik atheism. As William Husband points out, it did not *mandate* the persecution of individual believers. Yet, those eager for proaction were able to pursue confrontation through their respective governmental power bases and through the nationalisation campaigns that blurred the distinction between



non-religious and anti-religious. The campaigns were also erratic and often lacking in centralised control, whilst the absence of any policy for anti-religious propaganda meant that it fell to militant amateurs often counterproductive in their efforts.<sup>44</sup> After the Civil War, a more coordinated and focused attack was pursued to more effectively breaking the hold of religion. By 1922, six government bodies, including the Agitation and Propaganda Department (Agitprop) and the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) had overlapping responsibilities for anti-religious propaganda and policing, and they provided the institutional backbone to the expropriation campaign.<sup>45</sup> The Party's youth organisation, the Komsomol, began its concerted, and soon to be notorious, atheist agitation at the parish level in the same year.

In 1923, the Twelfth Party Congress called for a turn to mass propaganda to engage rather than alienate the Soviet people. The first mass atheist newspaper, *Bezbozhnik* (The Godless) had emerged in December 1922; it was now followed by an array of targeted newspapers and periodicals. *Bezbozhnik u stanka* (The Godless at the Workbench) addressed specifically industrial workers, *Derevenskii bezbozhnik* (Village Godless) addressed their agrarian counterparts, *Ateist* (The Atheist) offered philosophical and historical attacks on religion and the Church, whilst *Antireligioznik* (The Anti-religious) was a methodological journal for agitators.<sup>46</sup> In June 1925, the Friends of the Newspaper *Bezbozhnik* (formed in August 1924) became the League of the Godless, establishing a national body for the promotion of anti-religious propaganda. Membership of the League fluctuated widely and, despite its claims to leadership in the anti-religious struggle, it had difficulty enforcing its will on other interested organisations such as the unions and the Komsomol. It was also, as a typically Soviet institution, riven with factionalism and subject to the regime's constant changes of emphasis.<sup>47</sup>

With no consistent strategy and organisational framework emerging, the tendency to rely on 'administrative' measures to close churches remained, a subject that had troubled the Thirteenth Party Congress in May 1924 to the extent that it had again called for the end to repression and declared that the party should prepare for an anti-religious propaganda struggle that would likely take decades. The resolution of the Congress had an unintended consequence. It was widely interpreted as a call to relax anti-religious work. So extensive was the problem that the Party Central Committee had to reiterate the importance of the campaign in a directive of April 1926.<sup>48</sup> Three years later, the consolidation

of Stalinist power saw the return wholesale to the use of repression. The League of the Godless embraced the opportunity offered by collectivisation for increased atheist agitation, but it had won the 1920s argument in favour of persuasion over coercion only to lose the war in the 1930s.<sup>49</sup>

### HISTORY WITH THE CYCLES LEFT OUT

It is these wide fluctuations in policy that makes Bolshevik anti-religion so superficially amenable to divergent interpretations among atheists and theists. Yet there is a danger that, if these changes are not understood as having been cyclical, a distorted picture of the place of atheism in Soviet politics can emerge.

Thus, in 1940s, a striking rapprochement developed between the Stalinist government and the Orthodox Church. For Hector Avelos, this appears to be of far greater significance than the conflicts that preceded it. In 1943, Stalin met with Orthodox leaders, and bodies were set up—the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC) and the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)—to normalise relations between the Churches and the state.<sup>50</sup> The Orthodox Church was allowed to elect a Patriarch, imprisoned clergy were released and the process of reopening of churches, monasteries, and seminaries begun. Some religious literature would now be allowed, whilst anti-religious propaganda was largely curbed.<sup>51</sup> Avelos notes that the regulation of the Church through CAROC turned it from a pariah into a willing government organ that immediately seized the opportunity to begin persecuting its own rivals.<sup>52</sup>

This, for Avelos, is the clue to understanding the differing natures of Soviet anti-religion and Russian Orthodoxy. The first was simply not important enough to strongly influence the direction of the regime. Atheist aggression might be indulged when the government was looking for enemies, but it was quickly neutralised when policy changes required it. In the end, ‘rather than representing some radical atheistic innovation, Stalin’s normalisation was more akin to the Church-state unions common in many Western Christian countries.’ By contrast, once liberated the Orthodox Church reverted to type. It immediately began to pursue the monopolisation of the same scarce spiritual resources, and returned to ‘its pre-Communist alliance, though tenuous and complex, with the elite powers.’ Stalinism, Avelos concludes, is not so much an issue for atheists as for Christian collaborators.<sup>53</sup>

But Avelos' discussion fails to include even a single mention to the context in which this rapprochement occurred: that is, the Second World War. It was not a normalisation of Church-state relations, but a temporary measure born of emergency. Historians differ as to whether the state simply could not afford to ignore the Church's ability to bolster patriotism and morale, or whether they were more concerned to allay Western fears as to the spread of 'Godless Communism' in the wake of the Red Army's eventual advance.<sup>54</sup> Avelos offers as the bases of his argument the 'revelatory' work of historians such as Tatiana Chumachenko and Steven Miner. Yet each of their books challenges rather than supports his conclusions.

Chumachenko, on whom Avelos relies most, does indeed trace in great detail the drawing of the Orthodox Church into government control and attributes the subsequent 'satisfaction' of the Church to a long, even dogmatic, tradition within Orthodoxy to identify itself with the state.<sup>55</sup> Yet, she is quite clear that the legalisation of the Church was highly limited and was an expedient of foreign policy in which the Moscow Patriarchate would be used to exert international influence through ecclesiastical contacts. CAROC, Chumachenko argues, 'civilised' relations between Church and state in order that the short-term interests of the latter might better be pursued, but there was no ideological change. However, it might compromise temporarily with its enemies, it was never forgotten that nascent socialism must eradicate religion in order to mature. 'In this sense', she concludes, 'the Church in the USSR was doomed.'<sup>56</sup>

For Steven Miner, Stalin was engaged in an absolutely cynical exploitation of the Church. Whilst the Church played some limited role in the response to Operation Barbarossa, the rapprochement was driven by the needs of impending victory, in particular, the reoccupation of the western borderlands and the question of where the Soviet frontier would now be located. In 1942, the state and the Orthodox Church collaborated to allay allied fears as to the consequences of Soviet occupation. Orthodox bishops used a specially commissioned book and foreign contacts to spread the message that the faith was free from persecution. In May the following year, the regime's open turn in religious policy was timed to coincide with Stalin's strategic dissolution of the Comintern. But domestically, the Soviet government was alarmed by the upsurge of faith that had occurred during the war. Where churches had been reopened by the Germans, it was (reasonably) feared they would act as hubs of anti-Soviet resistance during the reoccupation. The Church could

bolster Soviet authority by excommunicating recalcitrant priests and giving their parishes to others loyal to Moscow, whilst in the western borderlands it could also undermine the nationalist autocephalous Churches by accusing their leaders of collaboration with the Nazis ('the enemies of the cross of Christ'), of betraying the Mother-Church and imperilling the souls of believers.<sup>57</sup> It was in order to facilitate such a role that Stalin—not the bishops—suggested at the September meeting that a Patriarch should be elected with authority over the Orthodox Churches to rival that of a pope.<sup>58</sup> But it was also intended that the Patriarchate should bring order and stability to the religious revival that was occurring behind Soviet lines. The upsurge, Miner argues, was a spontaneous reaction to the suffering inflicted by the war, but it was strengthened by the weakening of state authority in the chaos of the military campaign and reoccupation. 'The Soviet regime', he comments, 'made the Moscow Patriarchate its agent, not to assuage the public's thirst for religion, but rather to control and defuse unwelcome popular religious and national enthusiasms, rendering them politically manageable.'<sup>59</sup>

Like Chumachenko, Miner is quite clear. Stalin understood Communism and atheism to be synonymous, and he never intended the rapprochement to be permanent. It outlived him only because the Church continued to be useful in the aftermath of the war. For Stalin, 'religion was an instrument of social control, nothing more, and he would use it as such to manage the "simple people"..., beating the priests at their own game.' Miner is categorical:

It would be very wrong to conclude from the history of church-state relations that the Soviets 'negotiated' with believers, or that the regime was genuinely responsive to the public will. As every classified high-level Soviet document attests, the regime maintained its determination ultimately to extirpate religious belief; in the minds of Soviet leaders, the collaboration with the Moscow Patriarchate was nothing more than a tactic in this long game.<sup>60</sup>

Avalos begins and ends his discussion with Stalin. No doubt this is because Stalin is for so many theists the epitome of atheist criminality. But, stopping in 1953, his readers would be forgiven for believing that the 'normalisation' of the 1940s was the last of the cyclical turns in Soviet policy and that it defined Church-state relations and the wider position of religion thereafter. This was not the case.

Under Nikita Khrushchev policy was again reversed and the Soviet Union witnessed 'an anti-religious campaign of a ferocity unprecedented since the 1930s', that encompassed aggressive propaganda, legal repression and mob violence.<sup>61</sup> The historian of the campaign, John Anderson, notes the absolute centrality of its atheism. Khrushchev was a reformer who attempted to humanise Soviet society, but he was also an ideologue who intended to force up the momentum of political and social change so that communism would be achieved by the end of the twentieth century. The same timescale had, then, to apply to the creation of the scientific 'New Man' and to the eradication of religion. Yet again the continued prevalence of supernaturalism was a provocation showing just how much of the Old World still remained and how tenacious was its grip on the minds the Communists intended to 'free.'<sup>62</sup> With Khrushchev's fall from power, the situation for believers changed again. The new leadership exhibited a much more pessimistic attitude towards the speed with which a fully communist state might be created, and thus they accepted that, for the foreseeable future, religion would be an unwelcome presence in Soviet life that must be managed. The Brezhnev regime thus scaled back repression and aggressive propaganda, both now seen as driving believers underground where they were more difficult to control.<sup>63</sup> Politically compliant believers would now be tolerated under the supervision provided by state interference with church activities and KGB infiltration of the priesthood.<sup>64</sup> Proselytisers and dissidents were to be subject to administrative measures and arrest.<sup>65</sup> But however far into the future the eradication of religion had now been projected, what was at issue was the strategy not the goal.<sup>66</sup> To give only one illustration, by the end of the 1970s repression had been dramatically scaled back, yet the number of anti-religious lectures in the Soviet Union had reached 1 million per year.<sup>67</sup>

What remained consistent throughout the fluctuations in intensity and changes in strategy, then, was the ideal of a socialist polity devoid of religion and supernaturalism. It was an aim that, whilst regularly compromised, was not abandoned until the reform programme that immediately preceded the break up of the Soviet Union itself.<sup>68</sup> However, uncomfortable it is for modern atheists to accept, the acts of vandalism, of expropriation, of intimidation and murder were carried out as steps towards the eradication of religion. To properly understand this, we must do what Hitchens, Avalos and even a number of theists resolutely refuse to do. We must consider in context the meaning of such acts both to those who perpetrated them and those who were victimised.

## DESACRALISATION AND DIDACTIC SACRILEGE

Modern atheists, at least of the 'New' variety, display little ability to engage with religion as more than a set of specific metaphysical and theological beliefs. They are largely uninterested in church communitarianism, in rites of passage, sacred space or ritual because these are taken to be more or less vacuous expressions of the religious delusion. They are not to be taken seriously; to engage with them might seem to lend them credence. It is this that allows atheists to talk of 'only anti-clericalism', as if priest, building and icon might be removed without affecting the lives of parishioners, or as if such an impact as must be acknowledged need only be regarded as collateral damage. The Bolsheviks were not nearly so naive as to think that an attack on a church was not also an attack on the faith of its congregation. In physically cowing a class enemy, they knew that they were also diminishing the Church's ability to mediate between believers and their god. Nor was this simply a convenient side effect. The Bolsheviks found as little to take seriously in liturgy and religious expression as the New Atheists do now, but they took seriously their cultural and psychological importance in the lives of believers, and they intended to eradicate them, by force if necessary.

Take the example of church closure and expropriation. The Orthodox Church differed from its western counterparts in the absolute centrality of ritual in defining its identity.<sup>69</sup> The Bolshevik nationalisation of churches and their property was an attack on ritual, and ritual *was* faith. Entering the church enacted the personal journey to God, but it also drew the Christian into the community of believers and into a corporate liturgical experience. The church building was the place in which believers encountered the beauty of holiness, where they heard the word of God and where they confessed their sins. Here, the believer's abstract yearning for salvation was to receive, in the words of the historian of pre-Revolution Orthodoxy, Vera Shevzov, 'the structure and stimulus of matter.'<sup>70</sup> The church housed the icons that were the focus of Orthodox devotion. 'Russians pray with the eyes open', Orlando Figes notes in his cultural history, 'their gaze fixed on an icon. For contemplating the icon is itself perceived as a form of prayer. The icon is a gateway to the holy sphere, not a decoration or instruction for the poor..., the Orthodox confess, not to a priest, but to the icon of Christ with a priest in attendance.'<sup>71</sup> Most importantly of all, the church was the site of the Eucharist ceremony and so of the direct communion with God. Shevzov describes

the extended solemnity and sheer ceremonial investment that accompanied the taking of the Eucharist in a Russian Orthodox church:

...believers usually attended liturgical services during the entire week before they would partake of the Eucharist. Since most believers partook of the Eucharist during Great Lent, the services they might have attended included the following: Matins, Presanctified Liturgy, the Compline on Wednesday; Matins and Presanctified Liturgy on Friday. Following this last service, the priest would read the preparatory prayers for confession, a rite that sometimes lasted into the evening. While confessions themselves were heard, a Compline service would be read along with prescribed prayers, including canons to Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, and the Guardian Angel. It was considered a sin to eat or drink following confession until reception of the Eucharist during the Liturgy on the following morning. On Saturday morning, those who were to partake of Communion attended Matins, after which prayers for preparation for Communion were read. Only after this time was the Divine Liturgy served.<sup>72</sup>

The sanctity of the Eucharist, and of the process of spiritual cleansing, demanded the rarefied atmosphere of sacred space removed from the everyday.

An atheist can reject the validity of liturgy and ritual, deny the need for salvation, question the specialness of religious communitarianism, and yet still understand the serious, potentially traumatic, dislocation its sudden removal produced among believers. It requires only a small act of empathy, but one that makes it impossible to talk of ‘only anti-clericalism.’ By 1941 provision of Russian Orthodox churches was under 8% of what it had been in 1914.<sup>73</sup> To argue church closures only targeted institutional structure is to suggest that they took place in a cultural vacuum. They did not. For believers, it was axiomatic that the presence of the faith, embodied physically in the stone and mortar of the church building, and in the wood and paint of the icon, was essential to personal salvation and community wellbeing. As Shevzov notes, many derived satisfaction simply from the presence of a liturgically active church, believing that, whether they chose personally to attend or not, God required the correct provisioning of liturgical necessities to the community.<sup>74</sup>

The Bolsheviks understood well this occupation of mental space by the presence of a church, but they understood it as a usurpation. So they intended that the removal of the tangibles of faith would indeed be disorienting for parishioners. It would forcefully liberate that mental space,

leaving it to be occupied by new attachments more appropriate to the communist project.<sup>75</sup>

Their acts were self-consciously sacrilegious, in part because sacrilege was a means to the creation of the New Man. It was intended to express the irresistible momentum of atheisation and shock believers out of their faith. Statues that shed tears, icons that glowed in the dark—these had given a tangibility to the presence of the supernatural in the community. Wrenched from the clerical control they would be revealed as frauds. Ideological sacrilege reached its apogee in the disinterring of the Orthodox saints. Tradition maintained that the body of a saint would not decompose, a fallacy the Bolsheviks gleefully exposed as they publicly displayed the corrupted remains of some fifty-eight of them. Such blasphemies were lessons in atheist power. Consecrated vessels would be reduced to tradable metals and jewels sold on the international market. The shrines of the saints would be broken open and their bodies subjected to the public gaze. Icons would be taken into the street and shot at. Churches would be dynamited. In all this, the Bolsheviks scorned the notions both of consecration and of divine retribution. Did the apparent inability of God to answer not indicate His absence?<sup>76</sup>

It is in the context of the multifaceted nature of Soviet policy that we can assess Hector Avalos' claim that Stalinist repression in the 1930s should not be considered anti-religious. Two categories of victims, Avalos rightly argues, preoccupied Stalin. One was the Party bureaucrats who were purged in the Great Terror. The other was the kulaks: wealthier peasants who marketed their surplus produce and who became symbolic of a pernicious capitalism lurking within traditional rural society. 'Stalin himself spoke of the "liquidation of the kulaks" as part of his agenda', Avalos notes, '[h]owever, this had little to do with atheism.' Rather the kulaks fell victim to Stalin's economic policy of the forced collectivisation of agriculture.

The aim of the Bolsheviks had always been to nationalise all agricultural land and consolidate production into large mechanised farms (*kolkhozes*). Agriculture had traditionally been organised around inefficient small-scale strip farming and antiquated methods. Peasants, seeing the benefits of modern processes and machinery, would readily abandon the old ways. But by 1928 less than one percent of arable land had been collectivised. Stalin's government now demanded rapid change, and by 1937, at the end of an often chaotic and violent campaign, private agriculture in the Soviet Union had been destroyed. Perhaps, one-and-a-half



million kulaks were deported to the north and to Siberia, where they were abandoned, often with insufficient resources to survive. Those allowed to remain did so as second-class citizens and were subject to the confiscation of their property. Collectivisation was disastrous for agricultural production, provoking famine and killing between five and seven million people.

What could atheism possibly have to do with all this?

In order to demonstrate the lack of anti-religion in Stalinism's most destructive crime, Avalos quotes Nicholai Bukharin from December 1930. Collectivisation, Bukharin explained, was a 'break with the old structure, a process of refashioning the petty peasant economy on the basis of socialist collectivisation.'<sup>77</sup> Yet, Avalos appears not to understand his own quote. To the Bolsheviks talk of the 'old structure' of the rural economy, and of its 'refashioning' implied not only a structural reorganisation of landholding and production methods, but also a cultural critique of traditional agriculture that was fundamentally atheistic.

'No issue surpassed agriculture in exciting the expectations and frustrations of Soviet materialism', notes the historian of Soviet atheism, William Husband.<sup>78</sup> Russian farming continued to inhabit a pre-industrial mental world characterised by a sense of weakness against the forces of nature. Success relied on placating and coaxing these forces, not on subduing them.<sup>79</sup> Certainly, traditional peasant farming was infused with practices fit to make any New Atheist shudder. As Husband relates:

Peasant wisdom passed from one generation to another held that a bright moon on Christmas Eve was a good sign for crops and that Monday and Thursday were the best for sowing. Fields everywhere had to be cleared of evil spirits before ploughing and planting, and seeds were blessed at Easter. Among the Russian population of Ukraine, religious ceremonies called for sprinkling both seeds and fields with holy water before spring and fall sowing. On Iur'ev Day in Arkhangel'sk province peasants carrying icons and candles circumnavigated the area to be cultivated in the belief that this would cleanse it and improve fertilization. On the morning of Egor'ev Day in Vologoda province, every homemaker burned a candle before an icon of Saint George placed in a cup of rye, then carried a cup three times around the home and ultimately presented the rye to the parish clergy in church. And in a number of regions, villagers sought to improve fertilization by burying an effigy of a penis. Other forms of the sympathetic magic included trying to control rain by submerging a clergymen in a river in full vestments. An alternative subject for the dunking was a dummy in women's clothing.<sup>80</sup>

Collectivisation, then, needed to produce a new type of farmer: an agrarian New Man who understood the power over nature gifted to him by mechanisation, who embraced an entirely new relationship with the land as its master, and who rejected the myths forged in the time of impotence.<sup>81</sup> The Church was the most obvious obstacle to the peasant's new relationship with the land. Its only interest, the Bolsheviks believed, lay in endorsing the agriculture of superstition and so protecting its monopoly on the supply of ritual. But the kulak, the bogeyman of communist nightmares, was also the natural ally of stagnant agrarian supernaturalism.

This was the anti-religious component of forced collectivisation. Atheism was inseparable from the idea of the kolkhozy and the desacralisation of the village was inherent in its creation. Those who enforced collectivisation understood this, and the League of the Militant Godless appointed themselves the cultural wing of the assault. It was accepted that the collectivisation of a village implied the removal of its church. In 1929 alone, 1440 churches were closed.<sup>82</sup> In November of that year, *Pravda* celebrated the success of a renewed drive to expropriate church bells, not only in providing metals for industrialisation, but in creating 'atheist villages'.<sup>83</sup> As natural as the closure of the church was the removal of its priest. No doubt this was driven by pragmatism as much as by ideology. The clergy often labelled the kolkhoz the Devil's creation and encouraged peasants not to cooperate.<sup>84</sup> But they were essentially correct in representing it as a godless environment deliberately constituted to alienate villagers from their religious traditions. So arbitrary arrest and summary exile became common, and priests once again faced execution as counter-revolutionaries. Local Soviets set taxes for individual priests at impossibly high levels so that they could be imprisoned for 'resisting' when they were unable to pay.<sup>85</sup> Such practices were openly celebrated in the atheist methodological journal *Antirelioznik*.<sup>86</sup> As for the laity, the term 'kulak' was so elastic as a catchall for assumed counter-revolutionary sympathies that it easily embraced religious activism, congregational loyalty and the defence of church buildings.<sup>87</sup> Believers suffered economic persecution. In some areas in Rostov-on-Don, Husband relates, local officials in 1930 imposed taxes on individual believers between thirty and seventy times their 1928–1929 levels. Severe restrictions were also placed on normal religious observances, such as baptism or the laying in state of the dead.<sup>88</sup>

To be clear: I am not arguing here that collectivisation was an atheist crime—that the millions killed, exiled or left to starve were victimised

only because they were believers. I am arguing instead that, insofar as the creation of the *kolkhozy* demanded the cleansing of supernaturalism from agrarian culture, collectivisation was informed by atheism and was anti-religious. Those victimised suffered because they offered, on many levels, an affront to the economic and social collectivism the regime wished to inculcate. We should not simplify the highly complex interaction of the political, economic and cultural factors involved by blithely declaring, as many theists do, that atheism killed those millions. But we must accept that there was a significant atheistic component to the crime of forced collectivisation and that it provides insights into the potential forms and meanings of atheist violence.

Deconstructing Soviet anti-religious policy will tell us much. But it is only one side of the issue. Persecution is not only imposed, it is also experienced. To come closer to an understanding of the nature of atheist oppression we must explore what it meant to live with it—what it meant to carry the stigma of religion in a repressive state with overt atheist ambitions.

### UTOPIAN HOSTILITY: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL OPPRESSION OF BELIEVERS IN THE SOVIET UNION

The New Atheists' understand all too well the damage caused to those who suffer discrimination on the basis of their race, their gender or their sexuality. They claim a shared experience in the discrimination sometimes meted out to atheists themselves.<sup>89</sup> Yet, understanding that religious believers might suffer similar psychological oppressions under a militantly atheist regime appears to be an empathic step too far. A white, heterosexual, male New Atheist can reach beyond his own world and try to imagine the experience of someone who is not white, heterosexual or male when their voice or their agency is stifled and they are forced to suppress their identity. But the effort is apparently not required in the case of those who are not atheists. The vulnerability of their identity is not even recognised as an issue.

Yet, in the Soviet Union believers found themselves otherised by a regime that sought to establish atheism as the mental norm. Soviet propaganda was explicit. Religion was a pernicious anachronism conspicuously unsuited to the new cultural milieu. It was worthy only of ridicule and hectoring condescension. At one end of the spectrum was the loud religion-baiting of the Komsomol. This ranged from disrupting church

services to organised harassment during religious festivals, where atheist carollers went door-to-door and processions parodied those of believers:

...bands of youths would parade carrying huge posters with replicas of the distorted faces of saints. These would be followed by a truck on which sat a lurid looking Pope with a long beard. On his knee sat a half-naked prostitute who shared a bottle with him from which he often took sips.<sup>90</sup>

At the other end was the highly symbolic attempt to reduce religion to a museum piece. By 1929, thirty anti-religion museums had been created, whilst anti-religious rooms were also to be found in hundreds of other museums, public buildings and factories. The standard protocols of respectful display were overturned, the artefacts there to be scorned rather than admired. Removed from the legitimating environment of the church, these were repositioned within an atheist setting that revealed their status as mere objects.<sup>91</sup>

Soviet propaganda told believers that they too were anachronisms, their regard for clerical ‘charlatans’ implying only their ignorance and gullibility.<sup>92</sup> Against this was ranged idealised depictions of the new Soviet man and woman, gifted confidence and success by the liberating force of materialism. Peasants versed in agronomy were shown prospering whilst their religious counterparts starved as they waited for a miracle to grow their crops. Women were shown victimised by brutal husbands to the approval of the Church, their lives saved and given new meaning by the Soviet community that sought to nurture rather than abuse them.<sup>93</sup> The religious person was revealed as uncivilised and culturally retarded, engaging through sheer ignorance in a wide range of practices that were dangerous and even potentially lethal. Sharing communion spoons or kissing icons spread disease. Fasting endangered health through malnutrition, whilst religious holidays encouraged alcoholism.<sup>94</sup> Believers preferred magic to medicine, they preferred old-wives tales to midwives, and all was wrapped up in a superstitious fatalism that weakened them in the face of adversity. The Soviet atheist, by contrast, expressed their civilisation in understanding issues of cleanliness, healthy moderation and nutrition, and in the confident appreciation of the efficacy of science.

The reordering of public space expressed the new atheist realities. Church buildings were turned into schools, clubs, cafes, grain stores, and even a power plant.<sup>95</sup> Factories were offered as symbols of modernisation that might reroute both individual and communal attachment towards

the material. In anti-religious propaganda the factory took on the aspects of a church: an imposing cathedral-like building, its machinery its altar, presiding over the community and providing its focus.<sup>96</sup> Soviet New Year and International Labour Day (1 May) would displace Christmas and Easter. Harvest Day and the Day of the Tractor would ensure that thanks for the successful completion of the agricultural year went to Soviet modernisation rather than God.<sup>97</sup> In 1929, a new five day week ensured that only every fifth Sunday would coincide with a rest day, making regular church attendance impossible.<sup>98</sup> The atheisation of rites of passage was pursued in an entirely new 'Red' ceremonial in which the Soviet state, rather than God, would now preside over all of the significant milestones in an individual's life.<sup>99</sup>

Atheist propaganda was often counterproductive. Religion baiting simply antagonised believers, whilst the heavy-handed didacticism of the Red holidays offered little competition to the traditions of festivity, drinking and dancing.<sup>100</sup> Christopher Hitchens dismisses the campaigns as 'banal' and expressive of 'at least as much contempt for gullible yokels as any wonder-working icon.' He cites as proof the testimony of a cosmonaut, displayed in the Museum of Atheism, that God was not to be seen in space.<sup>101</sup> The implication is clear. The crudity of Soviet atheism ensures that we need not take it too seriously. Yet this conveniently sidesteps the fact that, whether or not *we* take it seriously, Soviet propaganda was serious in its atheism. It was a form of cultural discrimination that trumpeted believers' disqualification from the communist project and rationalised the social obstacles placed in their way. The April 1929 law on religious organisation made the position of believers clear. The right of 'religious propaganda'—any activity seen as promoting belief—was abolished, with the effect that all non-ceremonial religious organisation (such as Bible circles, youth and women's groups or church reading rooms) became illegal. At the same time, the law entrenched the right of 'anti-religious propaganda.' Believers were to be forced to listen to the arguments made against them, but they were not to respond. In being made so acutely aware of their marginal status, the religious came to understand that the maintenance of their identity would now involve the careful negotiation of the atheist state.

Those who continued to attend church demonstrated their rejection of materialism and thereby their rejection of a central pillar of the transformatory ideal of communism. Some perhaps attended with a brazen disregard for the attitude of the authorities, but probably the majority experienced churchgoing as a tightrope walk balancing the needs of

spiritual fulfillment with the inherent dangers of marking themselves out. One respondent to the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, a female typist, remembered,

They used to send spies to that church, just to see who was still attending...The pleasure of going to church, therefore, was killed. You'd enter the church and quickly look around; is there somebody standing there who might report you? Gradually we stopped going to church.<sup>102</sup>

The experience of vulnerability and exposure in churchgoing became instinctive. A female Harvard respondent recalled that even when churches were reopened during the German occupation she had been 'ashamed' to go for communion and 'chose a day when there was not many people in the church.' Another described her first visit to a church as an émigré in Berlin. Even here, she had been embarrassed and afraid, and had found herself looking around to make sure that she was not being watched.<sup>103</sup> Where no church remained many believers were driven to the even more surreptitious practice of establishing 'home churches' with such clergy and materials as might be available. Without clergy a semblance of worship could still be achieved through lay services and prayer meetings. Such activity was necessarily highly furtive and required careful arrangement.<sup>104</sup>

The dramatic reduction in opportunities for the public exercise of faith refocused attention on the domestic sphere and the family as the setting for the maintenance of religious identity. Traditionally, Orthodox households maintained a prayer corner in which icons were placed.<sup>105</sup> As in the church, the icon was the focal point of domestic prayer and religious contemplation. Family gatherings and common prayer could provide a structure for religious expression, whilst the basic liturgical year could be maintained through the home celebration of festivals such as Christmas and Easter. Yet, even these religious observances were transgressive, for it was never intended that a private sphere should exist free from the definition by the state. Domestic habits revealed much about the place of a family in the schema of friends and enemies by which the Soviets understood society, and a prayer corner, icons, Easter eggs or a Christmas tree were all unmistakable signs of continuing religious attachment. In fact, the state turned out to be highly ineffective at policing the private sphere, but believers understood that, if noticed, holding onto such tangible signs of religiosity might easily lead to discrimination.

So even the domestic pursuit of religion was carried out as a negotiation around the opportunities offered by unobtrusive private devotion and the potential pitfalls inherent in it not being unobtrusive enough. 'During the holiday season', one Harvard respondent remembered, 'I was sent by my mother to the homes of our closest friends and gave them seasons greetings. We could not send a Christmas card or a letter because mail was censored and holiday greetings were punishable by a jail sentence.'<sup>106</sup> Another claimed that on religious holidays some visitors came 'just to see what you were eating' and to report those who had prepared the traditional celebration foods. Icons were a particular source of insecurity. 'We used to keep icons in our home and my father often scolded my mother on this account', a respondent recalled, 'he was afraid that having the icons in the home would cause him difficulties, that he might even lose his job.' A Ukrainian student reported that his parents had hung icons on the wall but 'in 1932 my mother put them into a closet because my father was afraid he could be fired from his job.' Such concerns were not exaggerated. Those who were members of the Communist Party (required of civil servants) faced frequent inquiries as to how well they maintained an atheist household. 'One of the most common ideological offences for a party member', Sheila Fitzpatrick notes in her study of 'everyday Stalinism', 'was to have allowed his wife or other female relative to remain a believer, to christen their children, attend church, or keep icons in the house.'<sup>107</sup> Nor was a dismissal on suspicion of being religious confined to party-dependent jobs.<sup>108</sup> The strategy of locking away icons in trunks and cupboards became common, and so, as Soviet atheism forced a religious expression to withdraw into the home, in many families it also forced a further withdrawal within the home itself.<sup>109</sup> The prayer corner was abandoned and lost was the constant presence of the devotional artefacts that defined the home as a space for religion. The icon instead became the occasional welcome intruder into a domestic space now nominally atheist. The one area of devotion that simply could not be policed, however, was private prayer. Correspondingly, the internalisation of religion increased with the pressure exerted upon believers. The historian of Russian Orthodoxy, William C. Fletcher, described this process, by which believers continued to reside within the Soviet state but spiritually and emotionally located themselves elsewhere, as 'internal emigration.'<sup>110</sup>

The children of believers became a particular focus both of communist interest and of religious concern. The school was viewed by many

believers as a hostile extension of the surveillance state that had to be negotiated with caution. ‘I gave my children religious instruction at home from books’, a Ukrainian mechanic told the Harvard project, ‘I owned the Bible, church calendars, etc. But I told the children to say nothing of this at school and with their playmates.’<sup>111</sup> A female book-keeper remembered that her mother,

sent us to school on...Holy Days but always warned us not to say a word to anybody of what we did at home. She taught us to pray and told us not to speak against the Soviets.

...whatever she told us [about religion] was in a whisper and in fear that someone might be spying on her. Even the rustle of trees made her quiver and prompted her to peek through the window.<sup>112</sup>

Some of these fears were justified; we have seen the entrapment of the railroad official and its consequences. Similarly, another female student recalled that when she attended church at Christmas or Easter,

I would be called into the office of the director of the school the next day and given a scolding. I would reply that I had to obey my parents. My father was thereupon called to the school and also scolded. We had many unpleasantnesses because of this.<sup>113</sup>

Nor was the railroad official the only victim of an anti-religious school environment that, at the very least, abandoned the children of believers to the petty cruelties of the schoolyard.<sup>114</sup>

‘In the Soviet Union we all had divided souls’—this was how the female student described the experience of being torn between the rival truths offered by parent and teacher.<sup>115</sup> The description fits well the case of a young laboratory technician:

My family was opposed to what was taught in schools. I remember that I myself spent sleepless nights. I was plagued by the question: is there a God, or is there no God?...I talked with my father and my grandfather, and really the problem plagued me for quite a while, and maybe, is still plaguing me today.<sup>116</sup>

Others could have such conflicts resolved, but at the expense of their trust in their education. ‘I thought about it’, a Ukrainian projectionist answered when asked about the effect of anti-religious teaching, ‘and



then I would come home from school and ask my father...He said that the teachers are all simply phonograph records.’<sup>117</sup>

Some children internalised the atheism they were taught and came, as the regime intended, to see their religious elders as irrational and even ridiculous. ‘I used to see my mother standing and praying to herself, but I was not interested’, a Russian chauffeur noted, ‘[s]he sometimes got angry, and said “Why don’t you pray to God?” I laughed at her.’<sup>118</sup> An army intelligence officer described the potentially disruptive effect of atheism on household discipline:

...since I was a younger brother, the beginnings of communist education which my brother received in school were transmitted to me. He brought from school elementary communist slogans, for example that religion is the opium of the people. Thus at the young age, under the influence of Soviet school...the first rebellion against the parents starts. Thus once my brother and I arranged an anti-religious demonstration. It was his idea. A religious aunt often came to us and she liked to [pray] before an icon in our home. We placed Stalin’s portrait on this icon and we enjoyed it very much, when we saw her surprised face. Of course we received plenty for this from my mother.

This was an innocent prank but it was not random or unprompted. It expressed the sense that believers were unworthy of respect, and that the culture of the revolution superseded that of the family—the very ideas that the regime sought to inculcate in Soviet children.<sup>119</sup> Some conflicts could never be resolved. A male Ukrainian student, described his progressive detachment from his mother’s faith that resulted from anti-religion in school:

In 1932 I gave up praying. My mother was very sorry, but I couldn’t help her because in our school our teachers checked on whether we went to church or not. My attitude to religion changed during my tekhnikum years. I did not believe in God any more. Once when I came home for my vacation my mother asked me to pray. She said that it is not good to grow like an animal without God. Her words offended me and I called her different names.

The argument burned itself out (‘when she began to cry, I kissed her and begged her forgiveness’) but mother and son were never able to discuss religion again.<sup>120</sup>

Such testimonies are revealing, but of course, they must be balanced against evidence of other reactions to atheist persecution. Some believers no doubt were resigned. Others often proved adept at exploiting the limited rights accorded to them under Soviet law. They filed genuine petitions against church closures, against tax abuses, against being forced into demeaning labour.<sup>121</sup> Nor was violence the sole preserve of the regime. In rural areas, especially during collectivisation, atheist campaigners were often subject to intimidation and assault, and some were murdered.<sup>122</sup> Religious culture also possessed numerous resources for resisting atheisation. Folklore enshrined religious traditions in stories, songs and jokes; it was deeply engrained and benefited from the ability of oral culture to more effectively subvert efforts at censorship. Rumour became an especially powerful means for the circulation of anti-state and anti-atheist messages. The Bolsheviks' symbolic blasphemies, it was claimed, had indeed provoked divine retribution, and predictions of the immanent miraculous fall of the regime were common. God's vengeance would be visited on those believers who cooperated with Antichrist. Of course, where outright resistance was futile, circumvention, accommodation and internal emigration were themselves forms of agency.

Yet every of the myriad responses among believers was just that: a response. All were produced by the need to one way or another assimilate into their everyday lives a very real Soviet attack on their identity.

In some senses the concern over Soviet anti-religion is a problem of the New Atheists' own making. It is the consequence of their seemingly instinctive refusal to countenance the significance, or, for the most part, even the existence of atheist persecution. Safe, as they believe, in the knowledge that politics was the real motivator of Soviet atrocities, it is obvious that there is no need to consider what atheist oppression might mean for the New Atheism itself. Why reflect upon what did not exist? But historians of the Soviet Union have shown time and again that atheist oppression did indeed exist, however much it may have become inseparable from political and economic ideologies, and however cultic Soviet utopianism may have become. Atheism, a personal and individual lack of belief in God, was to be inculcated in others, forcibly if they resisted, until it stopped being a personal matter and became a condition of society. The Bolshevik atheist knew that God was not there and knew also that others must be made to see this truth and to live in accordance with it.

Nor was Soviet atheism a theoretical aberration. Its questions were the same as those that occur to most non-believers—where does religion come from, and what is its role, if it is metaphysically false? Its answers were, for the most part, wholly negative and uncompromising; but they were hardly unfamiliar to other atheists, then or now. What marked the Soviets out was their sense that religion was such a barrier to human wellbeing that its eradication was imperative (religion poisoned everything), and their willingness to seriously and strategically pursue that goal. No doubt the ideological dream of communism gave momentum to the assault by offering a utopian vision of what might be put in religion's place. But, if the Soviet practical response to religion was not our response, or, for that matter, the New Atheists' response, we should not doubt *that it was an atheist response*.

The reality of such oppression is hardly fatal to the credibility of atheism as a position that informs political and social worldviews. But extremist atheism is a historical fact and its victims have indeed suffered 'for the sake of an absence of belief.' (Dawkins) We know what such atheism looked like, and it bore no resemblance whatsoever to Grayling's 'sleeping furiously.'

## NOTES

1. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918–1956*, trans. T. P. Whitney (London: Collins & Harvill, 1975), vol. II, 65–66.
2. On the rejection of the nobility of 'little-endian' martyrdom, see *TGD*, 353.
3. Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (hereafter HPSSS), Schedule A, vol. 12, Case 156, 29–30, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:949031>.
4. Robert Conquest, *Religion in the USSR* (London: Bodley Head, 1968), 13–14; Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (London: Macmillan, 1987), vol. I, 27.
5. Conquest, *Religion in the USSR*, 14.
6. The Decree is quoted in Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 25.
7. William Husband, 'Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance, 1917–1932', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 70 (1) (1998), 51; id., 'Godless Communists': *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 49.
8. Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 343–344.

9. Ibid., 356; Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 49. On stories of torture carried by the Cheka see George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 197–198.
10. A three-man special commission for the quick prosecution of political crimes.
11. Leggett, *The Cheka*, 231, 309; Husband, *Godless Communists*, 54.
12. Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 347–348.
13. Ibid., 349.
14. Lenin to Molotov for Politburo members, 19 March 1922, in Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin: From the Secret Archive* (New Haven and London, 1996), 152–153.
15. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 36.
16. Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 126; Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 356.
17. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 136.
18. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 151.
19. Conquest, *Religion in the USSR*, 26–27.
20. Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, 1997), 78–79.
21. Ibid., 79.
22. Conquest, *Religion in the USSR*, 27–28; Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 80–81.
23. Conquest, *Religion in the USSR*, 28–29.
24. GiNG, 244.
25. Ibid., author's emphasis.
26. FW, 326–327.
27. TGD, 315; TNA, 116; Nick Harding, *How to Be a Good Atheist* (Harpenden: Oldcastle, 2007), 99.
28. FW, 93–112.
29. Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Oxford: Lion Books, 2006), 74; D'Sousa, *What's So Great About Christianity?* 218–219; Vox Day, *The Irrational Atheist: Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2008), 241.
30. A notable exception to this trend among theists polemicists is to be found in the much more cautious approach of Alister McGrath. See McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 49–55; see also McGrath and McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, 49.

31. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 14.
32. Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.
33. Peter Frizsche and Jochen Hellbeck, 'The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany', in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2009), 302–309, 314–326, 335–341; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 75–84; Barbara Evans Clements, 'The Birth of the New Soviet Woman', in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites (eds.), *Bolshevik Culture* (Bloomington, 1985), 220–237.
34. Quoted in Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 734.
35. Husband, 'Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance', 74.
36. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley, 1995).
37. Peter Holquist, 'State Violence as Technique: The Logic of Violence in Soviet Totalitarianism', in David L. Hoffman (ed.), *Stalinism: The Essential Readings* (Oxford, 2003), 132–156; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, chapter 5.
38. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 15–18.
39. The term is Pospelovsky's, see *ibid.*, 18–19, 25–26.
40. Quoted in Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 40.
41. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 19–20.
42. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 102–105, 120–121; Marsh, *Religion and the State*, 39–42.
43. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 48.
44. *Ibid.*, 48–50.
45. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
46. *Ibid.*, 59–62; Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 73–75.
47. *Ibid.*, 2, 4; Husband, *Godless Communists*, 62–67; Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 49–68.
48. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 64–65.
49. *Ibid.*, 66–67; Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 111–117.
50. Tatiana Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, ed. and trans. E. E. Roslof (Armonk: M. E. Sharp, 2002), 55.
51. Philip Walters, 'A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy', in Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16–17.

52. *FW*, 330–331.
53. *Ibid.*
54. For example see William Fletcher, ‘The Soviet Bible Belt: World War II’s Effects on Religion’, in Susan J. Linz (ed.), *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 91–94; Steven Merritt Miner, *Stalin’s Holy War: Religion, Nationalism and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 6–9.
55. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 189–190.
56. *Ibid.*, 193.
57. Miner, *Stalin’s Holy War*, 136–138.
58. *Ibid.*, 126.
59. *Ibid.*, 320.
60. *Ibid.*, 320–321.
61. Walters, ‘A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy’, 20.
62. John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapter 3; David E. Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1975), 88–93.
63. Walters, ‘A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy’, 23; Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 69–74.
64. Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 121–126; Walters, ‘A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy’, 25–26.
65. Walters, ‘A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy’, 23–24.
66. Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics*, 68.
67. *Ibid.*, 114–116.
68. See *ibid.*, chapter 6.
69. Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London, 2002), 300–307.
70. Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford, 2004), 66–77, quote at 70.
71. Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 299.
72. *Ibid.*, 76–77.
73. Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*, 52–53.
74. Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy*, 74–75.
75. Froese, *The Plot to Kill God*, 46–47.
76. Vladimir Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture and Society, 1921–1929* (London: Routledge, 1998), 94, 96.
77. Avalos, *Fighting Words*, 327–328.
78. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 77.
79. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 15–16.
80. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 77–78.

81. Ibid., 71.
82. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 125; Conquest, *Religion in the USSR*, 21.
83. Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 207.
84. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 142–144.
85. Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 204–205; Husband, *Godless Communists*, 136–137; Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 125–126; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 118–119.
86. Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 204–205.
87. Browning and Siegelbaum, ‘Frameworks of Social Engineering’, 240–242; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 122–123; Conquest, *Harvest of Sorrow*, 204.
88. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 136–137.
89. See, for example, the ‘Openly Secular’ campaign setting out to challenge ‘rampant discrimination’ against atheists in the US, <http://openlysecular.org/about/>.
90. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 122; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 31, Case 307(NY)1069, 39–40, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962274>; see also Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 40–41; Pipes, *Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime*, 357–358; Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 95–96.
91. Crispin Paine, ‘Militant Atheist Objects: Anti-religion Museums in the Soviet Union’, *Present Pasts*, vol. 1 (2009), 61–76.
92. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 75–77; Husband, *Godless Communists*, 87–88; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 128.
93. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 78–83.
94. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 88–89; Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 185–186.
95. Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 84–85.
96. Ibid.
97. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 91; Peris, *Storming the Heavens*, 88.
98. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism*, I, 138.
99. Husband, *Godless Communists*, 94–98.
100. Ibid., 59, 64–65, 92.
101. *GiNG*, 245; Powell, *Antireligious Propaganda in the Soviet Union*, 142.
102. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 33, Case 134, 34, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962323>; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 12, Case 149, 48, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959029>.
103. HPSSS, Schedule B, vol. 14, Case 41, 31, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959397>; HPSSS, Schedule B, vol. 14, Case 93, 6, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959403>.

104. William C. Fletcher, *The Russian Orthodox Church Underground 1917–1970* (Oxford, 1971), 84–94; Irina Korovushkina Paert, ‘Memory and Survival in Stalin’s Russia: Old Believers in the Urals During the 1930s–1950s’, in Daniel Bertraux, Paul Thompson, and Anna Rotkirch (eds.), *On Living Through Soviet Russia* (London and New York, 2004), 208.
105. Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 321–322.
106. HPSSS, Schedule B, vol. 14, Case 41, 32, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959397>; HPSS, Schedule A, vol. 35, Case 355/(NY)1498, 28, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981835>.
107. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 18.
108. Paert, ‘Memory and Survival in Stalin’s Russia’, 203.
109. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 6, Case 85, 17, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:941333>; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 32, Case 398/(NY)1204, 23, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962307>; HPSS, Schedule B, vol.14, Case 93, 6, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959403>; HPSSS, Schedule B, vol. 14, Case 41, 32, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959397>; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 33, Case 134/(NY)1368, 34, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962323>.
110. Fletcher, *The Russian Orthodox Church Underground*, 86–87; see also Paert, ‘Memory and Survival in Stalin’s Russia’, 208.
111. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 37, Case 324/(NY)1738, 17–18, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981992>; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 34, Case 420/(NY) 1451, 13, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981825>.
112. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 35, Case 355/(NY) 1498, 28–29, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981835>.
113. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 32, Case 642/(NY)1109, 30, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962303>.
114. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 34, Case 420/(NY) 1451, 13, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981825>; HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 35 Case 96/(NY)1493, 24–25, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981832>.
115. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 34, Case 420/(NY) 1451, 13, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981825>.
116. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 1, Case 6, 38–39, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:928120>; see also HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 34, Case 420/(NY) 1451, 13, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981825>.
117. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 15, Case 284, 30, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:951543>; also HPSSS, Schedule B, vol. 18, Case 484, 10, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959458>; see also HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 22, Case 446, 34, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959500>.



118. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 11, Case 138, 34, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:948911>.
119. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 11, Case 144, 91, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:948915>.
120. HPSSS, Schedule A, vol. 32, Case 398/(NY)1204, 23, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962307>.
121. Husband, 'Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Resistance', 87–91; Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 78–80.
122. William Husband, 'Soviet Atheism and Russian Orthodox Strategies of Resistance', 84–85; Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin*, 99–100.



## From the Spanish *Toca* to the American Waterboard: The Strange Yardstick of Ethical Progress

Let us turn to the second aspect of the New Atheists' assumption as to the ethical superiority of atheism: that atheists, as evidentialists and rationalists, are better protected against the kinds of (un)reasoning that leads religious people to think and behave badly. Central to this is a notion that the failure of religious moral guidance is inescapable. Ungrounded in any reliable epistemology, yet drawing the narrowest boundaries around the membership of its moral communities, religion simply cannot give us, in Sam Harris' words, 'real reasons for human solidarity.' In fact, 'no ideology is so eloquent on the subject of what divides one moral community from another.'<sup>1</sup> If atheism will not in itself make us good, it will free us from these influences. No longer bound by archaic strictures, and free to seek our morals in what we can empirically know about our species, we can build our ethics up from the foundation of our shared humanity. Atheism might allow us to actually become humanists.

At the heart of this lies a deep sense of historical separation. The post-Enlightenment ethical course is to be contrasted with a brutal past. Brutal not because it lacked ethics, but because those it had were so straitened, being innocent of the scientific rationalism that dissolves the artificial barriers created by ignorance and superstition. Distinctions in ethics, then, are to be understood as the products of fundamental inequalities in the distribution of intellectual resources. Religion has ever been the least well-provisioned, its ethical history read backwards (by the self-defined intellectually wealthy) as a study of rational and scientific impoverishment.<sup>2</sup>

It would perverse to deny that there are real issues here, yet we are entitled to ask: if atheism might free us from artificial limitations to our moral concern, to what extent are the fruits of this discernible in the writings of the New Atheists themselves? Has their intellectual provisioning made them, as they would have us believe, so much more ethically rational than our benighted religious ancestors and their current descendants? Certainly the New Atheism gives regular voice to numerous modern progressive concerns over race, gender, sexuality and the environment. Yet these are its inheritances, not its innovations. When it comes to its true Other—the religious—the picture is strikingly different.

Here we will examine the most extreme example of the contrast claimed between the ethical superiority of modern atheist rationalism and the indicative failure of the religious past: Sam Harris' now notorious advocacy of the torture of Muslim terror suspects.

### TORTURE: THEN AND PERHAPS NOW

As practiced by medieval Christians, judicial torture was merely a final mad inflection of their faith. That anyone imagined that *facts* were being elicited by such a lunatic procedure seems a miracle in itself.

...our disavowal of torture in the case of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed seems perverse. If there is even one chance in a million that he will tell us something under torture that will lead to the further dismantling of Al Qaeda, it seems we should use every means at our disposal to get him talking.<sup>3</sup>

These two quotes are separated by a hundred pages in *The End of Faith*. Explaining the apparent double standard, Harris, in an interview for *AlterNet* in 2007, explicitly invoked rationalism as the factor dividing inquisitors from modern interrogators. The first used torture to impose their delusions upon innocents, the second may uncover crimes that are all too real.<sup>4</sup> Rationalism can apparently act as an ethical gun sight, zeroing in on the circumstances in which torture will be the moral choice. Where the resort to torture exemplified the sheer weakness of the medieval mind overwhelmed by superstition, the modern secular mind can be unencumbered and accept the hard realism of a rational ethics awakened by an unprecedented global crisis. The ability to correctly engage with torture could, Harris concludes, be a confirmation of our intellectual and moral progress. It is a striking claim for the sheer distance between the ethical power of theist and atheist. The *toca* of the Spanish Inquisition and the waterboard of the CIA are the same, yet the intellectual clarity of

people like himself might finally afford torture the precision that so tragically eluded the Inquisition's befuddled and bigoted ecclesiastics.

Harris' position on torture could not fail to attract controversy.<sup>5</sup> 'Many readers', he complains, 'have mistakenly concluded that I take a cavalier attitude to torture. I do not.'<sup>6</sup> This is true up to a point, and those who caricature Harris as an enthusiast for violence misrepresent his views.<sup>7</sup> He argues instead for the existence of a moral reality beyond the witting invention of human beings and 'waiting to be discovered.' Neuroscience will explain our moral functioning, and identify which circumstances genuinely stimulate our experience of well-being. Inch by inch the yardstick will be revealed that will allow us to test humanity's competing ethical systems. Torture, Harris believes, is as an example of the ways in which we might access these ethical realities, and, notably, of the discomfort they are likely to cause us.

Our moral intuitions, Harris argues, are the products of a remote evolutionary history and often inadequate for the realities of the modern world. Take the ticking bomb scenario.<sup>8</sup> A suspect is known to hold information that could avert an immanent terrorist attack: would we not be bound to accept torture as the moral course of action?<sup>9</sup> We need an ethical absolute by which to deny that it is the lesser of the two evils. Without one there is no basis to reject torture *on principle*. Harris argues that we have no such absolute yet the discourse of liberal ethics reads almost invariably as if we did. The human brain evolved to be acutely sensitive to the pain of another individual, but it may be simply incapable of dealing with suffering on the scale we are now able so easily to inflict. Thus the irony that we instinctively balk at the intimacy of torturing a single terrorist whilst exhibiting so much less concern for those faceless innocents killed by the bombs we drop far away. These ethical illusions are hardwired, contextually illogical but feeling powerfully real. But, Harris concludes, they are an indulgence we can no longer afford if 'many innocent lives could be lost as a result of our inability to feel a moral equivalence where a moral equivalence seems to exist.'<sup>10</sup>

Thus Harris is claiming that we have reached a crossroads in our ethical development. Such is the danger we are now in, that we may have to reject our outmoded moral hardwiring and accept that our survival takes precedence over the luxury of our feelings.

For all its neuroscientific underpinnings, the real force of Harris' argument rests in abstract ethical theorising and in the avoidance of the history of torture itself. Harris has issued a public challenge to his opponents to give a purely principled argument against the logic of torture in his crisis scenario.<sup>11</sup> We may concede the point without following him

too quickly into the torture chamber.<sup>12</sup> For whilst he deftly uses the language of the civilisation clash and of the new ‘realities’ of ‘post-9/11’ terrorism to suggest that we are in uncharted territory and gravely in need of the hard rationalism of a new scientific ethics, the truth is that we have been here many times before. The history of torture has much to tell us about the naive faith Harris places in rationalism as a force for its limitation. A truly objective ethics of torture will want to take account of precedent, and precedent does not favour Harris.

Between the end of the Roman Empire and the late-twelfth century torture had fallen into disuse in Europe. Harris might be surprised to learn that Christendom owed its reintroduction not to bloodthirsty clerics, but to scientific jurists concerned to free justice from the reliance on God’s intervention and to champion human judicial competence. In both medieval Europe and modern-day America, then, societies that had abandoned torture contemplated its reintroduction as a rational necessity, but the medieval story—the one for which we know the ending—recounts the failure of rationalism to control its own offspring.

### TORTURE: EUROPE’S RATIONAL INNOVATION

The long-term context of the medieval rise of judicial torture was the move from private to public justice, and the rationalisation of law that followed the rediscovery of the imperial Roman law code of the Emperor Justinian in around 1070.<sup>13</sup> Before the twelfth century, as we have seen, trial proceedings revolved around the religious formulae of the oath and the ordeal,<sup>14</sup> forms of community justice that, in theory, placed limited expectations upon human judicial competence.<sup>15</sup> The ordeal was a resort in cases taken to be beyond earthly determination. The logic of torture was entirely different. It made no appeal to God, rather it expressed openly a confidence in the ability of humans to investigate crime and determine guilt. That torture should be considered an example of Christian man’s new-found judicial sophistication might seem repellent to us, but so it was.

The ordeal itself was outlawed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. ‘Henceforth’, the legal historian, John Langbein, notes, ‘humans were going to replace God in deciding guilt or innocence, humans called judges.’<sup>16</sup> The term ‘inquisition’ rings sinister to us now but what developed, the medieval *quaestio* (inquest), expressed these ideals of progressive, self-confident and human jurisprudence. The role of court officials became

fully investigatory rather than only presidential. Guilt was to be established through the progressive gathering of evidence and the recorded interrogation of defendant and witnesses. As the medievalist, Edward Peters, author of an important study of the history of torture, has noted:

The inquisitorial procedure offered much that would seem familiar and acceptable to the modern litigant: the avoidance of rigid, excessively formalised, and ritually announced and answered charges; the open airing of testimony and the weighing of evidence from both parties; the presence of a trained judge who might also act equitably in weighing intangibles. At its outset in the twelfth century at least, inquisitorial procedure seemed to reflect precisely that reliance upon reason, conscience, and a broadened concept of the social order that historians have praised in other aspects of life in this period.<sup>17</sup>

The cultural underpinning of jurisprudence continued, of course, to be religious, but the role of supernaturalism in the court was massively reduced.

Instead the inquisitorial system held to a remarkably high standard of terrestrial proof, one that disallowed as too weak many types of evidence upon which a modern jury might convict. The Romano-Canonical law of proof, adopted by the new system and based on the Roman law of treason, demanded nothing less than a confession or the testimony of two eyewitnesses.<sup>18</sup>

In this lies an uncomfortable irony for the New Atheists. They would have it that medieval torture reflected the shameful credulity of a theocratic judicial system enthralled by its own fantasies. In fact, however grotesque inquisitorial practice would become, the reasons for the adoption of torture lay in the precise opposite. As Peters has shown, it was *incredulity* that drove the willingness to torture. How were the new procedures to offer the kinds of definitive judgements so readily apparent through the ordeal? Hence the attraction of the Romano-Canonical law of proof. Circumstantial evidence or hearsay might be suggestive, but they would be *indicia* only: indications but not confirmations of guilt. This, Langbein argues, reflected the sheer gravity of the change whereby medieval Europeans lost the ability to appeal to God's omniscience. Such a demanding system of statutory proof made the judgement of men palatable if it could rest 'upon standards of proof so high that no one would be concerned that God was no longer being asked to resolve the doubts. There could be no doubts.'<sup>19</sup>

But still one form of evidence was clearly superior. Confession required no lucky happenstance that two trustworthy people should be on hand to witness the crime. It was also the only acceptable proof for clandestine offences, an inherent weakness in a system that accorded circumstantial evidence no convictional force.<sup>20</sup> Thus jurists elevated confession to the status of ‘the queen of proofs.’ It was unlikely that confession would long remain a matter only for the conscience of the accused, especially when strong *indicia* were against them. Indeed, Langbein argues that the possibility that unwitnessed offenders might so readily escape justice would have entirely discredited the Romano-Canonical proof system had the principle of coercion not been swiftly accepted.<sup>21</sup> To the hard logic of the new rational jurisprudence, torture appeared an entirely reasonable means by which to furnish a trial with the queen of proofs, and it became an established part of mainstream legal procedure.<sup>22</sup>

Here it was, in theory, governed by very strict rules. Its advocates hardly accorded to Harris’ stereotype of unthinking tormentors besotted with the power of torture to confirm their delusions. Rather they were acutely aware of the dangers of abuse and far from credulous as to the value of the testimony extracted. Torture could only be used when a number of strict criteria had been met. It could never be applied in cases where the suffering inflicted would outstrip that imposed by the eventual punishment. There had then to exist sufficient strong *indicia* to allow a reasonably confident expectation of confession once it was applied.<sup>23</sup> This was not the same as relying on torture to be self-justifying after the accused had been forced to say whatever was required. Rather the burden lay in demonstrating that all other means of establishing the truth had been exhausted. In the *inquisitio generalis* a judge had first to produce a *prima facie* case against an individual. The trial proper, the *inquisitio specialis*, then assessed the type and strength of the *indicia*, which were defined in a rigid hierarchy (‘quarter-proofs’, ‘half-proofs’ and their combinations) to guard against subjective judgements.<sup>24</sup> When a set of *indicia* merited torture the defendant had to be allowed to challenge each individually, to cross-examine witnesses and to appeal if the judge still decided to proceed. If all the criteria had been met, threat was always to be tried first with the accused being implored by a priest to confess and shown the instruments under which he would suffer.<sup>25</sup>

The investigating magistrate was to supervise the application itself, accompanied by two observers, with a physician present if severity

was expected. The details of the specific tortures and the defendant's responses were to be recorded, and suggestive questioning was to be avoided. Torture should not cause permanent injury, and should only be by prescribed methods. Whilst undoubtedly terrible, the *strappado* or the thumb-screws were used in part because, in working on the body's extremities, they reduced the danger to the life of the accused and were capable of instant relaxation upon confession. They could also be effectively controlled. Predetermined rules, for example, governed how long the accused should be suspended in the *strappado*. Further restrictions limited the duration of the procedure as a whole. All forms and grades of torture were to be applied only on a single day and torture was thereafter not to be repeated. This reflected not a hypocritical concern for the accused but the rationalism of torture's jurisprudence. Confession had to be trustworthy and powerful as torture was, its results were uncertain. The guilty might be able to endure, whilst the innocent might condemn themselves to escape the pain, and so the success of torture relied on the correct balance being achieved between severity and limitation. Certainly, no confession given under torture was to be considered valid in itself. The presiding judge was responsible for verifying all of the details provided, and the confession was validated only if it was repeated away from the place of torture.<sup>26</sup>

### THE HARRIS METHOD: A SUPERIOR RATIONALITY?

Contrast the above with the notions of acceptable practice put forward by Harris and consider to whom we should attribute the greater rationality. He claims precision in the restricting of torture to extreme crises, yet, when examined, the circumstances in which Harris can imagine its use are highly nebulous, and far broader than those envisaged by his medieval forebears.

Instead of a suitably narrow and rationalised set of criteria, we get a series of casually employed examples, which obscure rather than focus the ethics of torture. The definition of 'imminent' threat turns out to be highly elastic. In 2004 Harris called openly for the torture of senior Al Qaeda operative, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (and later Osama Bin Laden), on the speculative basis that 'his knowledge of planned atrocities must be extensive.'<sup>27</sup> This 'brings us *closer* to the "ticking bomb" scenario', and that, apparently, is enough.<sup>28</sup> But what was the imminent atrocity, the foreknowledge of which drove Harris reluctantly to



demand torture? He simply assumed that Sheikh Mohammed *must know something*. This is not the ticking bomb scenario, but rather the flattening of the perception of urgency as all terrorist activities, from intention to conception to planning to execution, are accorded a single level of emergency. For Harris, the timer is attached not so much to the bomb as to the mind of the fundamentalist. A grave threat no doubt, but one unlikely to be countered by subverting our ability to seriously assess relative levels of urgency.

That Harris is really envisaging a fishing expedition is further demonstrated by his casual attitude to the usefulness of the information torture might produce. 'Make these confessions as unreliable as you like', he notes, 'the chance that our interests will be advanced in any instance of torture need only equal the chance of such occasioned by the dropping of a single bomb.'<sup>29</sup> For this argument to have force, torture must be seen as a net cast wide by interrogators with the time to sift the good information from the bad. Surely, in the true ticking bomb scenario the likelihood of catastrophe is *increased* if security services are distracted by false information. Harris' conclusion, that the possibility of a terrorist misleading his interrogators appears 'less of a concern' than opponents of torture might imagine, only makes sense if he is not really envisioning an imminent attack but a future one.<sup>30</sup>

We again find a sharp contrast with medieval rational theory in Harris' apparent indifference to the real question of guilt and innocence. Far from any formalised *indicia*, he is content with a generalised assumption of guilt which he takes as sufficient to forfeit a suspect's human rights. Indeed, in deciding whether Khalid Sheikh Mohammed should be tortured we apparently needed only to consider that 'his membership of Al Qaeda more or less rules out his "innocence" in any important sense.'<sup>31</sup> A figure as shameful as Sheikh Mohammed is unlikely to engage our sympathy, but that should not overshadow the fact that Harris has here implied that there exists a criterion of *unimportant innocence*, the definition of which he leaves us to guess at. Similarly, the detainees in Guantanamo Bay—'rather scrofulous young men, many of whom were caught in the very act of trying to kill our soldiers'—revealed themselves in their belligerence to the West and forfeited our restraint.<sup>32</sup> So what began with the use of torture against terror cells has moved seamlessly to encompass Taliban fighters and Iraqi insurgents. Attacks on American civilians and attacks on American soldiers on the battlefield are made equally criminal by simply ignoring the obvious differences between

them. In the end, Harris advocates an inversion of justice. Medieval jurisprudence held that torture could not be a first response and established strict criteria to ensure this. Harris instead defines an entire class of criminals on the basis that they are by default tortureable. So general are his criteria for sufficient guilt that it would be more meaningful to ask what *disqualifies* a Muslim suspect from the waterboard?

Should we accept the misapplication of torture? Harris apparently believes we must. On the one hand, there is the sheer breadth of his notion of sufficient guilt. Since detainees will almost certainly be guilty of something (he believes), cases of the torture of the genuinely innocent will be few. Torture may reveal a suspect to know nothing about the specific plot that concerns the interrogators, yet he/she remains one of the 'scrofulous' belligerents who are beyond our sympathy. After all, their lack of involvement in *this* plot is merely a case of unimportant innocence; a tactical misapplication of torture perhaps but not necessarily a moral one. On the other hand, the rare cases of the torture of the importantly innocent should not be as difficult to come to terms with as we seem instinctively to believe. In 'collateral damage' we have already accepted the precedent that innocents may be harmed as a consequence of warfare undertaken in the pursuit of a greater good.<sup>33</sup>

Having claimed both the existence of a moral absolute that justifies torture and a superior rationalism in the targeting of its application, Harris' attitude to its legality is then strange to say the least. He denies the slippery slope argument that precedent would lead to proliferation, but concedes that torture must remain illegal to avoid 'unacceptable consequences.'<sup>34</sup> Yet,

...our interrogators should know that there are certain circumstances in which it will be ethical to break the law. Indeed, there are circumstances in which you would have to be a monster not to break the law. If an interrogator finds himself in such a circumstance, and he breaks the law, there will not be much of a will to prosecute him (and interrogators will know this).<sup>35</sup>

The medieval torturer was a supervised functionary of the court empowered only to act on a decision taken after open consideration. His actions were recorded and set within known parameters of severity and duration.<sup>36</sup> For his use of torture to remain conveniently illegal, however, Harris' interrogator must be a free agent, uncontrolled by any judicial body, and able to inflict whatever torments he sees fit for whatever

length of time he finds appropriate.<sup>37</sup> Those who indulge in the kind of abuses made notorious by Abu Ghraib, Harris reassures us, will know that they court a long prison sentence.<sup>38</sup> The notion that this could in any way guarantee sufficient restraint is fanciful. Harris' interrogator need only claim that his actions, however brutal, were undertaken in good faith (in an atmosphere of crisis) to be beyond reproach; and remember 'interrogators will know this.' Such a claim might be legally challenged, of course, but, as we have seen, the crisis latitude Harris envisions is discouragingly wide.

Such a position seems strikingly at odds with Harris' claims for the existence of moral absolutes and of a 'science of good and evil.' Having identified one such absolute, and challenged any doubter to refute it on principle, he then claims that the law is incapable of assimilating it. Where should moral absolutes have influence if not in the shaping of our laws? Harris tells us that, as responsible scientists must accept good research even if it overturns established paradigms, so rational, scientifically informed ethicists must accept such moral absolutes as can be identified regardless of the discomfort they may cause. Indeed this is how we will know they are 'adequate to the task.'<sup>39</sup> If, then, the moral choice to torture really is an absolute in the ticking bomb scenario, are we not obliged to incorporate it into law? If we are not, what use are moral absolutes? Harris' invitation to hypocrisy hardly seems to epitomise the moral confidence he promises in his espousal of hard rationalism over soft relativism.

But it might be objected that my comparison is inappropriate, even if it is invited by Harris' own juxtaposition of medieval and modern torture in *The End of Faith*. Medieval torture was a route to the correct application of punishment. Harris is concerned with crime prevention, where an over-precision in legal niceties could only hinder the urgent measures being undertaken. But the comparison does stand, for the very reason that Harris' version of torture is what medieval and early modern practice would become when, in the face of apparently unprecedented crises, strict regulation was abandoned. There emerged in European justice classes of criminals who were tortureable by definition and whose crimes, seen as assaults on civilisation itself, placed them beyond the protection of normal criminal procedure. The irony is that Harris' ideas of acceptable practice in torture do not resemble those of his twelfth-century predecessors because they are actually much closer to those of the witch-hunters.

## CRIMEN EXCEPTUM

No historian has any illusions about the reality of medieval torture. For all its rationalist origins, and for all its ideals of rigorous procedure, it was a brutal system open immediately to abuse.<sup>40</sup> Yet historians are agreed that had the rules of torture been adhered to the great witch-hunts of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could never have occurred. They did so because in a number of jurisdictions the strict regulation of torture came to be seen as unsuited to the urgency of rooting out a terrifying threat to the community. Witchcraft came to be understood as a *crimen exceptum*, literally an exceptional crime so serious that the normal rules of jurisprudence did not apply.<sup>41</sup> It was a development fatal to the rational principles with which the inquisitorial system of proof had been created.

Large-scale witch-hunting occurred when the fear of *maleficium* turned into moral panic. Individual acts of harm were here understood to be the tell-tale sequels to a more fundamental spiritual and intellectual crime: that of diabolic apostasy. Where God ordained order, harmony, charity and peace, Satan pursued disorder, chaos, malice and conflict. Witches internalised these anti-values. They rejected human sentiment and fellowship, and renounced their baptism in a ritual of departure from the moral community. But more than this, witches were the conspiratorial members of a terroristic anti-society. They attacked *caritas* by breeding discord and disrupting community harmony. They overturned nurture through infanticide, and assaulted the family through illness, impotence and even the infliction of demonic possession. They encouraged fear through economic instability, destroying livelihoods by attacks on animals and crops. In all this, witches sought not only to victimise but ultimately to disempower Christian governance. As government and magistracy aimed to embody and protect the social order that God had ordained, witches promoted its inversion; in the words of historian, Stuart Clark, they sought a 'regimen of misrule': a government of chaos, the organising principle of which—its cardinal anti-virtue—was pure, unwavering hate.<sup>42</sup>

Witch-hunting, then, tended to undertaken in an atmosphere of alarm, even crisis. As the historian of Scottish witchcraft, Christina Larner, remarked,

There was really no period in the whole of the witch-hunting era when the indictment, trial, and execution of a witch was regarded by either authorities or populace as completely routine. A witch was by definition an abnormal person. The execution of a witch was a demonstration of group

solidarity. It removed the provocative deviant and redefined the boundaries of normality to secure the safety of the virtuous community. For witch trials to have been made a routine procedure would have robbed them of their principal social meaning.<sup>43</sup>

A *crimen exceptum* required exceptional methods, and witch-hunters found ample justification to abandon the rigours of the inquisitorial system when these seemed hamper their efforts against an enemy whose motives and actions could not be assimilated into standard jurisprudence.

The particular utility of torture in not only in securing confessions but also identifying accomplices had long been recognised. As we have seen, in 1252 Pope Innocent IV legalised its use upon suspected heretics for that purpose, and here he seems to have been following developments within secular courts. As another crime understood to be conspiratorial by definition, witchcraft was inherently vulnerable to torture being used to ask ‘who else is guilty?’, and to the escalations that must result. Further relaxation of inquisitorial procedure was, however, necessary to make prosecution tenable in the first place. For the *inquisitio generalis* witchcraft left little or no tangible evidence of its performance, and even identifying symptoms of bewitchment was deeply uncertain. No *corpus delicti* was likely to be established by a scrupulous inquisitorial judge. But this fact only contributed further to witchcraft’s status as an exceptional crime that, *since* it left no trace, must be allowed a lower standard of evidence in the construction of a *prima facie* case.<sup>44</sup> Witch-trials themselves (the *inquisitio specialis*) were thereafter perhaps uniquely reliant on confessions to render a guilty verdict. Indeed, as the practice of witch-hunting developed and knowledge of it was transmitted, magistrates probably learned to expect that this would be the case.

Torture was a concomitant of such a reliance under the inquisitorial system, but it was also regarded as suitable to the treatment of what was as much a mental crime (a crime of attitude) as a physical one. Since physical evidence of *maleficium* was so unlikely to be found, emphasis was increasingly laid on proving that the defendant was a witch in mind—i.e. that she had committed diabolic apostasy in giving her allegiance to Satan—and only secondarily that she was guilty of performing witchcraft. Once her status as a demonic servant was established, her guilt with regards to specific acts of harm could reasonably be inferred. Eventually a reliable confession was expected to begin with diabolic recruitment. In effect, the witch was to admit to her internalisation of the anti-values of

malice, violence and chaos. This in turn dissolved the restraint on torture still further. To order its use, judges now had only to assure themselves that suspects were likely to be guilty of the mental crime of satanic allegiance. The defendants were, to appropriate Harris' terminology, 'scrofulous' belligerents whose evident anti-societal allegiance 'ruled out [their] innocence in any important sense.' Under sufficient coercion, the details of the witch's crimes would be revealed and she would be forced to share her knowledge of the wider conspiracy in which she was embroiled. She would name those she had seen at the witches' sabbat, those she had personally conspired with and those others she knew to be diabolic agents. She would uncover for her tormentors the actions being undertaken to terrorise the community.

In numerous jurisdictions restraint in the torture chamber itself was abandoned. Cases notorious in the history of witch-hunting illustrate the extremes to which the torment could sometimes be taken as the medieval ideal that torture should leave no permanent injury was ignored. Both the Scot, Dr Fian, and the Frenchman, Urbain Grandier, for example, were subjected to the 'boots', a torture in which the legs were crushed to such a degree that it was claimed that bone marrow spurted from them. Other recorded brutalities included burning with hot irons, filling the mouth and nostrils with lime, gouging out the eyes, genital torture and burning brandy or sulphur over the defendant's body.<sup>45</sup> These torments were almost certainly illegal under the law codes of early modern Europe. Ignored also was the rational demand that the duration of torture should be strictly limited. In 1376, Nicholas Eymeric, writing a manual for inquisitors, had set the precedent for the casuistic circumvention of the rule on the non-repetition of torture. An unproductive session could be considered unfinished and so, at another time, might be 'continued' instead of 'repeated.' During the witch-hunts the duration of torture was often significantly extended, in some cases indefinitely until the victim confessed. Such cases subverted utterly the idea that resistance to torture might act as proof of innocence. In many cases, the question was no longer if but *when* the accused would talk.<sup>46</sup>

Two factors seem to have informed this willingness to inflict the severest torments on witchcraft suspects. One was the commonly held belief that the Devil provided his agents with supernatural means to withstand pain, forcing the authorities to rely on especially cruel methods.<sup>47</sup> A second was the perceived urgency of the need for conviction and the pursuit of co-conspirators. Through her confessions the witch would empower

the authorities to break the ongoing conspiracy, providing redress for those who had suffered, but also preventing further harm. As important, it would re-establish the stability and order the conspirators had sought to destroy, reinforcing the values witchcraft challenged and the status of magistracy and Church as their protectors. The popular image of witch-hunting associates it with the cruelty of self-serving fanatics (think Vincent Price in *The Witchfinder General* or F. Murray Abraham in *The Name of the Rose*). But historians have long understood that such figures were very much in the minority. Fear drove witch-hunting, unregulated torture and the abuse of a judicial system once given authority by its rationalism. Those involved believed that they were protecting their way of life from a terrifying threat. Some no doubt could be condemned as over-zealous, some as paranoid and some as simply sadistic; but many others, if only under the Harris defence of acting in good faith in the face of an apparently extreme crisis, would have to be exonerated.

#### ISLAM AS *CRIMEN EXCEPTUM*

Sam Harris has found his own *crimen exceptum* and his own anti-society to perpetrate it. The differences between witchcraft and Islamic terrorism are obvious, of course, not the least of which is the fact that, however strongly it was believed in by contemporaries and however widespread its practice, witchcraft was never real. None but the most inventive conspiracy theorist would deny the reality and seriousness of Islamic terrorism. Yet, given the emphasis Harris places on witch-trials as an exemplar of theist irrationalism, it is striking that he seems unaware that his own depiction of 'the problem with Islam' bears many of the hallmarks of the kind of moral panic that drove the persecution. The civilisational conflict between society and anti-society, between value and anti-value, the notion of the belligerent 'Other' and of violence as the expression of a more fundamental intellectual crime—all these factors are present in Harris' depiction of the threat from Islam. His resulting acceptance of the torture of Muslim terror suspects is already prey to the same jaded logic of fear that marked the point at which the rationalism of inquisitorial jurisprudence and judicial torture failed.

We might indulge here in the type of thought experiment of which Harris is fond. Imagine an interrogator, inspired by the promise of a superior rationality, leafing through *The End of Faith* hoping to

understand ‘the problem with Islam’, and in search of guidance as to whether or not the circumstances of his investigation merited torture. What would he find?

Admonitions to tread warily, no doubt, with an open-eyed acknowledgement of the brutality of torture and a demand that it only be used in the direst circumstances. But at the same time he would find an uncompromising elevation of all Islamist activity to a single level of civilisational emergency. He struggles, it seems, against the ‘roiling ocean of Muslim unreason’, and may need to ‘protect our interests in the world with force.’<sup>48</sup> Only the economic and technological weakness of the Islamic nations shields us (for now) from being ‘doomed to witness the Islamification of the earth’, and unless the very principles of the faith are dissolved, ‘it seems all but certain that our newspapers will begin to read more and more like the book of Revelation.’<sup>49</sup> An attack within an hour, within a day, a month, a year, sometime in the future? These, he would realise, should be assessed not as discrete crises with relative levels of threat but rather as equivalent manifestations of a now permanent emergency precipitated by the very existence of the Islamic anti-society.

Islamist violence, our interrogator would learn, is merely the most honest expression of the anti-values that lie at the heart of the religion—the mental crime of Islam. The conflict between Western value and Islamic anti-value is stark and should be obvious to anyone not in thrall to multiculturalist ‘wishful thinking.’ Western cultures embrace life and self-expression, and revolt against their fragility. This shapes even the ethics of war. Islam idealises subservience to theocratic totalitarianism and the overpowering of those who cannot be assimilated into the faith.<sup>50</sup> The ‘only future devout Muslims can envisage—as *Muslims*—is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated, or killed.’<sup>51</sup> Non-Muslims have no separate identity and no human value beyond that in relation to God’s plan for the faithful. They are either Muslims-to-be, slaves-to be or targets-to-be.<sup>52</sup> To every Muslim with the honesty to admit their creed, ‘the people who died on September 11 were nothing more than fuel for the eternal fires of God’s justice.’<sup>53</sup> This is the ‘irrescindable militancy’ of a religion that sees only a fallen world ‘desperately in need of conquest.’ It normalises the idea of killing in the name of God.<sup>54</sup>

But our interrogator would be made aware of an even more sinister anti-value driving Muslim aggression. Islam ‘more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a



thoroughgoing cult of death.<sup>55</sup> Muslims are fixated by death (and hell) as the punishment for infidelity, in love with death (and paradise) as the reward for faith.<sup>56</sup> This whole necrocultic fixation can, Harris believes, be read in a single quote from the father of modern Islamism, Sayyid Qutb:

The Koran points to another contemptible characteristic of the Jews: their craven desire to live, no matter at whatever price and regardless of quality, honour and dignity.

‘Stare at it for a moment or two’, our interrogator would be promised, ‘and the whole machinery of intolerance and suicidal grandiosity will begin to construct itself before your eyes.’<sup>57</sup> To understand this terrifying reality he need only consider the prospect of an Islamist regime procuring nuclear weapons. No system of deterrence can operate against those who grow ‘dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise.’<sup>58</sup> The death fixation is often associated with nihilism and the pursuit of destruction for its own sake, but the Islamic case is driven by its opposite—sheer, unwavering belief in the transformatory virtue of death. Muslim irrationalism makes the love of death ironically rational: ‘Devout Muslims simply *know* that they are going to a better place...Why not, then, delight in the death throes of a sinful world?’<sup>59</sup>

Nowhere is Islamic thanatophilia more apparent than in the supposedly near-universal reverence for self-martyrdom through suicide bombing. The martyr’s eternal ‘bordello’ makes it ‘seem like a career opportunity.’<sup>60</sup> Our interrogator would learn that the case must not be seen, as apologists for Islam would claim, as a perversion of the faith. The single Koranic statement prohibiting suicide, Harris would tell him, is swamped by those others sanctifying hate, enjoining violence towards unbelievers and celebrating martyrdom. Put together it is a particularly lethal combination of ideas in which ‘suicide bombing hardly appears to be an aberration of [Islamic] faith.’<sup>61</sup> Indeed, ‘The Koran’s ambiguous prohibition against suicide appears to be an utter non-issue.’<sup>62</sup>

What might this mean for our interrogator’s suspects? In the end they may be implicated or not. But he can rest assured that, as Muslims, ‘they’ have murdered ‘us’ time and again in their minds. ‘If’, Harris asserts, ‘you believe anything like what the Koran says you must believe in order to escape the fires of hell, you will, at the very least, be sympathetic with the actions of Osama bin Laden.’<sup>63</sup> Mental guilt can be safely inferred if we can finally learn to believe that Muslims believe what they read.<sup>64</sup>

‘Open the Koran’, the interrogator would be instructed, and, as it pours relentless vilification on infidels, ‘simply read it with the eyes of faith.’<sup>65</sup> The inability to do so is the downfall of most liberal commentators who prefer to blame politics or economics because they cannot understand sheer belief.<sup>66</sup> Better the Harris rule of thumb for our interrogator: ‘insofar as a person is *observant* of the doctrine of Islam – that is, insofar as he *really* believes it – he will pose a problem for us.’<sup>67</sup>

Reading *The End of Faith*, our interrogator would gain a reassuring, legitimating sense of the moral gulf between himself and his quarry. On issues of morality, he would learn, Muslims are simply not as developed as us.<sup>68</sup> The truth of this he would instinctively recognise. Is it even conceivable, Harris wonders, that the Iraqi Republican Guard would have fought any war, as the US military does, by attempting to minimise civilian casualties?<sup>69</sup> ‘What are the chances’, our interrogator would be asked, ‘that Iraqi soldiers would have wept upon killing a carload of American civilians at a checkpoint unnecessarily?’<sup>70</sup> He would be expected to answer ‘zero.’ Not because he specifically imagines these men to be power-hungry psychopaths, Baathist loyalists, delusional Islamists or even merely desensitised to violence by a lifetime’s experience of tyranny, but because he imagines them simply to be Muslims.

How, then, might a Muslim caught up by coalition forces convince an interrogator with *The End of Faith* in his pocket that he is among that apparently elusive group: the importantly innocent? If he looks, talks and acts like a ‘devout’ Muslim he confesses his membership of the anti-society. He admits to the mental crime of reading the Koran through the ‘eyes of faith’ and so to his internalisation of its anti-values. He reveals his fantasies of global domination for his religion, his delight in the worldly and otherworldly suffering of the infidels, and his fixation with death. He might deny this, but his interrogators should be slow to believe him. Muslims, Harris declares, are well practiced at casuistry, obfuscation and even downright dishonesty when it comes to disguising the nature of their faith from outsiders. Our suspect might claim an alternative reading of the Koran, perhaps emphasising the spiritual meaning of jihad as a personal internal struggle to live in faith. A contrivance, Harris assures us, aimed at obscuring Islamic militarism. He might claim to be tolerant of the views and lifestyles of others, and give evidence of a long and peaceable involvement in a multicultural community. Another smokescreen. ‘What minority’, Harris asks, ‘even a radicalised one, isn’t generally “tolerant” of the majority for most of its career? Even avowed

terrorists and revolutionaries spend most of their days just biding their time.<sup>71</sup> Harris has even asked if honesty is not ‘the Muslim world’s scarcest resource?’<sup>72</sup> Unless our suspect can convince his captors that he is not really devout—not really a Muslim—his thought crime can be safely inferred and his call on the restraint of his interrogators is, at the very least, significantly diminished.

### A NEW SUPERIOR RATIONALITY, OR OLD-FASHIONED MORAL PANIC?

Is this really the product of a superior rationality, at the cutting edge of a scientific ethics? Does it really exemplify a liberation from the delusional fears that strangled the reason of our ancestors? The threat from Islamic terrorism is serious, and it cannot be Harris’ concern itself that qualifies as moral panic. What does, however, is his insistence that such extremism is representative of all faithful Muslims, that the very existence of ‘our’ society is at stake, and that, as a consequence, a specific type of criminal is now to be considered tortureable by default. If his discussion of Islam and torture is an example of his scientific ethics, then his scientific ethics is curiously insubstantial.

Much is reliant not on real evidence but on a discursive sleight of hand. Harris moves blithely from ‘Islamism’ to ‘Islam’, from ‘Islamist states’ to the ‘Muslim world’, from ‘Muslim terrorists’ to ‘Muslims’, and back again; all to imply that no meaningful differences exist between them. His only qualification is to equate anti-values with ‘devout’ Muslims. But the distinction is then rendered all but meaningless by his insistence that ‘moderate Islam – *really* moderate, *really* critical of Muslim irrationality – scarcely seems to exist.’<sup>73</sup> His simplistic understanding of the relationship between religious text and action is offered as a new first principle for the analysis of Islamic motivation, one apparently missed by all other commentators.<sup>74</sup> The Koran shows *what* Muslims believe, and the fact *that* they believe it more than adequately explains their behaviour. Complicating factors, such as politics, economics, cultural and technological stasis, can be downplayed as of only secondary importance (‘good’ questions but not the ‘deeper’ ones).<sup>75</sup> Perhaps this is the result of a scientist’s yearning for explanatory efficiency. But instead of demonstrating the overriding influence of literalism, he simply cudgels his readers with Koranic expressions of hate, then points to cases of Muslim violence as if the causal link were

obvious.<sup>76</sup> It would be naive to think that no such relationship exists. But simply juxtaposing scripture and examples of behaviour is not in itself evidence of a connection so overwhelming as to render all other factors tangential. It is not strictly evidence of a link at all.

No theologian, philosopher of religion or religious historian would deny the importance of considering what it means to take holy texts literally. Writers such as Bernard Lewis or Malise Ruthven, whose interpretations Harris believes are too muddled by political and economic contextualisation, do not deny the centrality of the Koran to Muslim worldviews. They are hardly unforthcoming in locating extremism within traditions and tendencies of Islamic faith. Rather they seek to show how those tendencies relate to others that oppose them, to show the processes of selectivity by which Koranic traditions both of extremism and moderation are shaped, and to identify the political and social catalysts which periodically activate competing internal trends. It is not that they deny the power of reading the Koran through ‘the eyes of faith’, but that they are aware of how the focus of those eyes can differ between believers. They seek, in short, to chart the fluidity of Muslim culture without denying or exaggerating its potential for extremism and violence.<sup>77</sup>

Harris prefers to offer the entire of Islam as a monolithic culture, defined by a single unchanging—indeed unchangeable—relationship between holy text and reader. Indeed it is the exegetical motives, not of fundamentalists but of ‘moderates’ that are to be questioned. It seems impossible to Harris that a Muslim stressing the spiritual interpretation of jihad might be making a sincere exegetical case (whatever Harris himself thinks of its validity). Whilst claiming to hope for the reform of Islam from within, he seems determined to meet any evidence of a moderating exegesis with accusations of dishonesty. Better also to believe that seemingly peaceable Islamic communities in the West are simply ‘biding their time’ than to allow the possibility that they might have found living among their neighbours a barrier to wishing them dead.

Harris’ approach, then, does not appear to exemplify a new hard ethical rationality. Rather it is a polemic of ‘otherisation’ so obvious that it can only be supported by his rejection of any form of analysis that might lead him to examine his own prejudices. It is not so much a bid for explanatory efficiency as a rebellion against the inconvenience of nuance. ‘Undoubtedly we should recognise the limits of generalizing about a culture’, he declares, whilst manifestly failing to do so.<sup>78</sup> Secularists should indeed take seriously the motivating force of belief. However, they will

be better served by those academics and commentators who have always done so but as a means to produce analyses of the interactions of culture and politics worthy of the complexity of the human beings they study. Harris is very far from the enthusiast for violence that some of his critics make him out to be, but given its tendency to interpretive dogma and moral panic, we should hardly relish the idea of an interrogator with *The End of Faith* in his pocket.

## NOTES

1. *TEoF*, 176–177.
2. See, for example, *WiG*, chapter 4; *IDoA*, passim.
3. *TEoF* 85, 198, author's emphasis.
4. John Gorenfeld, 'Sam Harris's Faith in Eastern Spirituality and Muslim Torture', <http://www.alternet.org/story/46196>.
5. See for example, William T. Cavanaugh, 'Colonialism and the Myth of Religious Violence', in Timothy Fitzgerald (ed.), *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London, 2007), 259; Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, 155–157; Andrew Brown, 'Sam Harris, Torture, Quotation', *The Guardian*, 8 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/aug/08/religion-atheism>; Jonathan Derbyshire, 'The NS Profile: Sam Harris', *New Statesman*, 20 April 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2011/04/harris-science-moral-faith>.
6. Sam Harris, 'Response to Controversy', 4 April 2013, [http://www.sam-harris.org/site/full\\_text/response-to-controversy2/](http://www.sam-harris.org/site/full_text/response-to-controversy2/).
7. Sam Harris, 'Why I'd Rather Not Speak About Torture', 28 April 2011, <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/why-id-rather-not-speak-about-torture1/>.
8. Alan M. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), chapter 4.
9. But see also Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), chapter 2, in which he systematically and convincingly lays out the internal contradictions (the 'fantasies') of the scenario.
10. *TEoF*, 198–199.
11. Harris, 'Response to Controversy'.
12. On the debate surrounding the ticking bomb scenario see Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*; Jonathan Allen, *Warrant to Torture? A Critique of Dershowitz and Levinson*, ACDIS Occasional Paper, 13

- (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005); Sanford Levinson, 'The Debate on Torture', *Dissent*, Summer 2003, <http://www.dissent-magazine.org/article/?article=490>; Sanford Levinson (ed.), *Torture: A Collection* (Oxford, 2004); Alex J. Bellamy, *Fighting Terror: Ethical Dilemmas* (London: Zed Books, 2008).
13. James Heath, *Torture and the English Law: An Administrative and Legal History from the Plantagenets to the Stuarts* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 15.
  14. On the practice of the ordeal see Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), esp. chapter 3.
  15. Edward Peters, *Torture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 42–43.
  16. John Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof: Europe and England in the Ancien Régime* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 6.
  17. Peters, *Torture*, 51.
  18. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 4.
  19. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
  20. *Ibid.*, 7.
  21. *Ibid.*; Bartlett, *Trial By Fire and Water*, 140–142.
  22. Peters, *Torture*, 49–50.
  23. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 5.
  24. Peters, *Torture*, 57; Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 12–14.
  25. Peters, *Torture*, 57.
  26. *Ibid.*, 57–58; Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 5, 14–16.
  27. *TEoF*, 198; Harris, 'Response to Controversy'.
  28. *Ibid.*, my emphasis.
  29. *TEoF*, 197.
  30. Harris, 'Response to Controversy'.
  31. *TEoF*, 197–198.
  32. *Ibid.*, 194.
  33. *Ibid.*
  34. Harris, 'Response to Controversy'; on the potential consequences of the normalisation of torture see Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb*, chapters 4 and 5.
  35. Harris, 'Response to Controversy'.
  36. Similarly see Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works*, 159.
  37. Harris takes his strategy for the application of torture from journalist Mark Bowden, who appears enthralled by the interrogators/torturers he has interviewed, accepting unquestioningly their claims of skill and success, and the moral grey area it seems to justify. See *Road Work: Among Tyrants, Heroes, Rogues and Beasts* (London: Penguin, 2006), 71–110.
  38. Harris, 'Response to Controversy'.

39. *TEoF*, 175.
40. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 8–9.
41. The classic study is Christina Larner, ‘Crimen Exceptum? The Crime of Witchcraft in Europe’, in V. A. C. Gatrell, Bruce Lenman, and Geoffrey Parker (eds.), *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe Since 1500* (London, 1980), 49–75.
42. Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 86–87.
43. Larner, ‘Crimen Exceptum?’, 57.
44. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof*, 14.
45. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 80–81; Larner, *Enemies of God*, 108–109.
46. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 80–82; Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours*, 216–217.
47. Although sleep deprivation might also be used on this basis, see Larner, *Enemies of God*, 107–108.
48. *TEoF*, 132–133, 152.
49. *Ibid.*, 152.
50. Equally strident assertions on this are made by Onfray, see *IDoA*, 199.
51. *TEoF*, 110, author’s emphasis.
52. Again, see *IDoA*, 199.
53. *TEoF*, 117.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 123.
56. *Ibid.*, 118–120.
57. *Ibid.*, 123.
58. *Ibid.*, 128–129.
59. *Ibid.*, 136, author’s emphasis.
60. Koran 47:15, 55:54–56, 56:12–40, 76:12–22; *TEoF*, 127, 32.
61. *Ibid.*, 123–124.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.*, 132, 133, 117.
64. *Ibid.*, 110–111.
65. *Ibid.*, 112, 117–123.
66. *Ibid.*, 117, author’s emphasis.
67. *Ibid.*, 28, author’s emphasis.
68. *Ibid.*, 143–145.
69. *Ibid.*, 142–146.
70. *Ibid.*, 146.
71. *Ibid.*, 114.
72. Sam Harris, ‘Honesty: The Muslim World’s Scarcest Resource’, 14 March 2011, [http://www.samharris.org/site/full\\_text/honesty-the-muslim-worlds-scarcest-resource/](http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/honesty-the-muslim-worlds-scarcest-resource/).

73. *TEoF*, 111, author's emphasis.
74. *Ibid.*, 123.
75. *Ibid.*, 116–117.
76. *Ibid.*, 117–123.
77. For example, Malise Ruthvern, *Islam in the World* (London: Penguin, 1991); *id.*, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* (London: Granta, 2002); *id.*, *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London: Phoenix, 2002); *id.*, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Phoenix, 2003); see also Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001); Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Abacus, 2007).
78. *TEoF*, 130, 142.





## Atheism, Religion and the Myth of Cultural Distance

If the most assertive claims for the novel ethical power of atheism seem less than historically well founded, what of the broader sense of its immunity from exclusivist mentalities and the tribalism they create? What of the sense that here the separation between atheism and religion is profound and unbridgeable?

For many critics, the New Atheism itself is a form of fundamentalism. Like religious literalism, it seeks to establish a single authoritative route to knowledge—science—that, in devaluing alternatives as non-knowledge, creates barriers to genuine dialectical exchange. Yet, the sense of being the privileged holders of the truth produces a peculiar mixture of assurance and paranoia. Religious fundamentalists fear the loss of God’s message in modernity’s liberal cacophony. They are matched by the New Atheist sense of science’s vulnerability in the postmodern buyer’s market of truth and meaning.<sup>1</sup> Siege mentalities harden a discourse of reductive and caricatured polarisations, and religion is stereotyped into a target suitable for what Jeff Nall terms ‘intellectual carpet-bombing.’<sup>2</sup> The opposition of worldviews becomes highly moralised, each side accepting, as William Stahl observes, ‘that from belief flows behaviour, so that if beliefs are wrong, behaviour will be wicked.’<sup>3</sup> The caricature of the nihilistic and vice-addled atheist is mirrored by the New Atheist’s own of religion as moral ‘poison’ and the only known force that can ‘make good people do bad things.’ As with their opponents, the New Atheists place their truth at the vanguard of a struggle to protect an embattled world, and believe that the eradication of religion is a prerequisite for the

promotion of peace and social harmony. Indeed, some critics have even identified here a form of apocalypticism.<sup>4</sup>

The common response, whenever it is observed that an atheist movement appears to be acting like a religion, is that it simply cannot be so. If atheism is the absence of belief, there can be no beliefs to act as markers of acceptability or as treasures that can be blasphemed. Atheists have no creedal identity from which to ostracise others. They have nothing to worship; they cannot think, feel or behave like worshipers. And if many espouse a commitment to humanism, what of it? Humanism 'imposes no obligations on people other than to think for themselves' (Grayling).<sup>5</sup> At worst, it is argued, we might be dealing with a case of mistaken identity. The 'passionate' commitment to science, and the 'robust' and 'vigorous' challenge to religious falsehood might be mistaken for a fundamentalist 'belief' in atheism.<sup>6</sup> But if so it is the projection of religious characteristics onto an entirely different species of thought.<sup>7</sup>

As already noted, such arguments sidestep the more inconvenient reality that the absence of belief in God tends not to remain isolated as a privative assertion unconnected to questions around the good life and the good society. A false sense develops that atheism somehow resists culturation and maintains its privative essence even as it is assimilated into the lived experiences of humans. As a non-culture, atheism cannot be subject to the insights gleaned by long decades of research into history, sociology, politics or cultural studies. This false separation is strongly implicit in the New Atheism, in which the insistence that religion be understood as an entirely human invention, and so explicable as a series of cultural operations, is unaccompanied by any matching self-reflection.

The identification of fundamentalism within the New Atheism seems fair. We have seen that supernaturalism itself is insufficient to explain discriminatory cultures within religion. Rather these emerge out of claims to hold truths upon which the wellbeing of both individuals and society depends, truths to which all must be aligned. Such claims are in no way absent from atheism. But the sense that the New Atheism is *only* fundamentalist is certainly too broad. It flattens out the multiplicity and fluidity of its discourse. It is, perhaps, better to talk of the presence, within the movement's broader discursive palette, of specific languages that are also found prominently within religions. More accurate, I think, is to speak of potentials and of the appearance of certain discourses that exist in tension with others leading in entirely different directions. What

follows, then, is not an attempt to present the New Atheism as a religion, but instead to trace some of the ways certain important aspects mirror discourses by which religions claim philosophical authority and moral superiority, and by which they maintain of in-group purity and rationalise out-group discrimination.

### THE TEMPTATION TO SUPERNATURALISM

Temptation is a language that we associate with religion but have absorbed neutered into popular culture. As the desire for something forbidden, we have here reduced temptation to a euphemism for harmless self-indulgence—the ‘naughty but nice’ with its frisson of faux taboo. By contrast, we no longer refer to genuinely dangerous indulgences as episodes of temptation. Instead, we use other discourses, most notably those of addiction and criminality. We no longer, then, recognise other, more fundamental languages of temptation when they are employed in secular contexts. Yet the New Atheists, whether they care to use the term or not, are acutely concerned with religion and superstition *as* temptation.

Concern over temptation can emerge in any culture that perceives a disjuncture between the ‘known’ true nature of the world and humans’ ability to live in accordance with it. Faced with the wide allegiance to a worldview that is apparently demonstrably false, the New Atheists go to great lengths to explain the human propensity to supernaturalism. This might be approached only as observation, leaving ethics to a different layer of investigation. But discourses of temptation are generated when the two are melded by the pre-existing sense that what is being analysed is a species of imperfection. For the religious, temptation explains why humans (the godly included) appear to be so incapable of behaving as their creator intended. The intention of the New Atheists is to account for the failure of the majority to live, as they would see it, rationally. *Propensity* is invariably re-characterised as *susceptibility*; ‘inclination to’ as ‘weakness for.’ In both cases what is under consideration is human fallibility measured against an ideal fidelity to something external—God’s will on one side, the ‘fact’ of naturalism on the other. And in both cases the fallibility in question is taken to be regrettably general, a weakness that defines humans, and so defines humans as intrinsically flawed.

In the sixteenth century, for example, many disillusioned Christians came reluctantly to believe that the entire Catholic faith had been

corrupted by the Devil. These ‘Protestants’ had, then, to explain how Catholicism was such a convincing fake. They resorted to an understanding of the mechanics of temptation. Men and women instinctively needed to worship their creator, yet they had lost their spiritual insight and become confused by the sensations of the flesh. The Catholic Church, with its grand edifices, its ornamented ritual and its cults appealed directly to this confusion, and the fallen man was apt to mistake this sensual but empty performance of holiness for the real thing. He was tempted towards the fatal error of mistaking physical comfort for spiritual security. True faith lay instead in the realignment of innate spiritual yearning with an austere and unsentimental knowledge of reality. Ritual and music, and saints’ shrines and sacraments, were to be distrusted precisely because they seemed too immediately fulfilling. The very rightness of Catholicism to instinct, the senses and the emotions made it suspect in reinforcing humans’ fallen nature rather than elevating them above it. Instead, Protestants were to develop a vigilant discipline of reasoned counter-intuition by which the distractions of false religion, the flesh and the world would be seen through.<sup>8</sup>

Secularists often tend to think of the religious sense of temptation only as a list of specific activities supposedly prohibited by God. In this sense, temptation has little place in their concerns. But the more fundamental expression of temptation as the lure of the wrong worldview, based in the wrong sense of where the truth lies and reinforced by a misplaced but instinctive trust in the wrong experiences—this can indeed be found widely paralleled in current forms of anti-religion. The New Atheism, in particular, is acutely concerned with the dangerous vulnerability of humans to the mismatch between feeling right and being right, and it detects everywhere the lure to embrace comforting illusion over hard truth.

To the New Atheists, we are not fallen from a perfect primal archetype. But we are seen as a debased version of what we *could* be, led astray by another peculiar confusion of our intuitions. Humans, we are told, are born with a deep fascination with the world around us, with the imagination to explore it theoretically and the objectivity to explore it empirically. In short, we carry within us the intellectual recipe for scientific naturalism. Yet despite this, we harbour deep inclinations to the wrong metaphysics. Our curiosity becomes mired in a powerful sympathy for notions of active creation, directed order, spiritualism and the sense that the universe was made for us. These things appear not merely

as one plausible answer to the question of existence; rather, because they are suggested by instincts as natural to us as the question itself, we are preconditioned to *feel* their truth.

So Dawkins notes that humans appear to be ‘natural born dualists’ who intuit that a separate immaterial mind ‘inhabits the body and therefore could conceivably leave the body and exist somewhere else.’ If we are primed, then, to ask what is the nature of existence, we are not primed to naturally understand that it resides only in matter.<sup>9</sup> We have developed an acute sensitivity to patterns in nature, but this has left us primed to seek patterns out whether they are there or not, and so to attach false significances to accidental correlations.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, we have evolved shortcuts to identifying potential threats. One involves predicting behaviour on the basis of what a particular physical attribute—on another animal, say—appears to be designed ‘for.’ This *design stance* (Dennett) leaves us unprimed to recognise the accidental and purposeless in nature. It is surpassed in usefulness by the *intentional stance* (Dennett again) in which the most efficient shortcut to prediction is to assume that an entity is an agent with intentions that will determine its actions.<sup>11</sup> Our most basic instincts, then, prime us to find design, purpose and agency in the world, but they are no guide to what is really there, or, more specifically, to what is not.<sup>12</sup>

‘It is a feature of human beings’, Grayling notes, ‘that they are eager for accounts that give explanatory closure.’<sup>13</sup> Our curiosity is characterised by impatience, a lack of discipline and a distaste for uncertainty. Too readily we accept accounts of nature that appeal to the prejudices formed by our evolved intuitions, and, satisfied with the fit, we often prove tenaciously disinclined to revision.<sup>14</sup> Of all human propensities, the most problematic appears to be our solipsism, both as individuals and as a species (Hitchens). When we deploy our unique ability to explore the world, we unwittingly sabotage the exercise by refracting what we then see through the lens of our sense of self. We demand that the make-up of the universe confirm what we like to think of as the profound significance of our own existence. We are simply not primed to come naturally to a sense of our irrelevance to the cosmos or to recognise that it was not prepared for us.<sup>15</sup>

The early Protestant had to learn the discipline of counter-intuition. The New Atheists’ human must do the same, negotiating a cultural morass of invitations to surrender to his intuitions. Negotiating, that is, the temptation to supernaturalism.

In *Unweaving the Rainbow*, for example, Dawkins identifies specifically the lures offered to our ‘appetite for wonder.’ This need is most properly fed by science, the meeting of the two the key to an authentic appreciation of the world cleansed of ‘saccharine false purpose’ and ‘cosmic sentimentality.’<sup>16</sup> But instead, we gasp at the powers of the clairvoyant and the astrologer; we are intrigued by coincidences that seem much too improbable to be coincidences; we yearn for the ‘mysteries’ of ghosts, alien visitations, monsters in lakes and ape-men in forests. ‘What we need’, Dawkins declares, ‘is less gasping and more thinking.’ False wonder is dissolved by more sober reflection. The astrologer’s accuracies are revealed as nothing more than us obligingly filling in our own details to his nebulous predictions. Astonishing coincidences are indeed just coincidences—highly improbable when they relate to us as a single human but, within a population of seven billion, happening to someone, somewhere at every minute of every day. Flying saucers, Bigfoots and Loch Ness monsters are not dismissed because scientists are spoilsports, but because the supposed evidence for them is simply unconvincing.

But temptation qualifies as temptation because it is tempting. Even the most rational of us are not immune, and what we can reason out is maintained in constant tension with our more jaded impulses. Hitchens describes the ‘natural advantage’ of superstition, remembering the ‘tiny surge of idiotic excitement’ provoked, in the face of his rationality, by an astrologer’s promise of romance.<sup>17</sup> Dawkins gives several examples of astonishing occurrences, including one that he admits ‘amazed’ him, and explains the mathematical probabilities by which they are revealed as merely highly unlikely.<sup>18</sup> Yet, he argues, beneath our power of rationalisation there is ‘something lurking’, it being ‘much harder to shake the feeling of spine-chilled awe when the coincidence happens to *you yourself*.’<sup>19</sup> It might, Dawkins notes, be theoretically possible to ‘recalibrate ourselves [and] learn to adjust our gasp threshold.’ Ideally, we would simply cease to see patterns and presences where none existed, and so be free of the need to labouriously explain their emptiness to ourselves. But ‘this seems to be revealingly difficult even for sophisticated scientists and mathematicians.’ In the absence of such a biological redemption, scientific thinking needs to be actively imposed on our brains as a discipline. But, precisely because it is ‘systematically counter-intuitive’ and so often ‘an affront to common sense’, it must also be vigorously maintained in the face of inevitable mental revolts against it.<sup>20</sup>

## DEATH AND THE TEMPTATION TO RELIGION

One temptation above all stands out in New Atheist and anti-religious polemic. The human capacity for abstract thought comes at the price of the unique awareness of our mortality—knowledge, we are told, with a power unsurpassed to dissolve such rationality as we have attained. Our sentience is affronted by the notion that it is a temporary illusion residing nowhere but in the material workings of our bodies. The possibility of annihilation insults our solipsism and proves too terrible to contemplate. At the same time, our imaginations allow us to fear *being* dead as if it is a state that can somehow be experienced. Our capacity for love subverts our ability to accept the finality of separation.<sup>21</sup> Religion, then, tempts us with the most enticing offer humans can receive: it will free us from the truth of death. Few of the New Atheists are entirely unsympathetic.<sup>22</sup> But all, with varying degrees of severity and judgementalism, find the belief in an afterlife a form of weakness by which humans succumb to the temptation to pretend that mortality is not real. ‘Far better to swallow fables’, Michel Onfray declares, most contemptuously of all, ‘than to see the reality in all its naked cruelty...’, *Homo sapiens* wards off death by abolishing it.<sup>23</sup>

The ‘correct’ reaction to the foreknowledge of death is, again, the suppression of impulse and the disciplined application of rational thought. We need, Grayling notes, ‘an unvarnished, uncompromising portrait of [death] as the greatest fact of life.’ Science tells us that consciousness cannot survive the cessation of brain function. Oblivion, like a dreamless sleep, cannot rationally be feared, and, as a non-experience it cannot be considered either good or evil.<sup>24</sup> For Dawkins, we might reflect that we have literally been dead before, and that our end will simply return us to the state that we were throughout Ice Age or the Roman Empire, without suffering, in the quoted words of Mark Twain, ‘the slightest inconvenience from it.’<sup>25</sup> Or we might ponder our astonishing good fortune to have existed at all, so that the fact that we must die ‘makes us the lucky ones.’<sup>26</sup> Yet, Dawkins reserves his deepest respect for an approach more hard-nosed than this, for the ‘strong meat’ of a defiant, even haughty, refusal of the very need of consolation attainable only by ‘robust intellects.’ He quotes Bertrand Russell:

I believe that when I die I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.  
I am not young and I love life. But I should scorn to shiver with terror

at the thought of annihilation. ... Many a man has borne himself proudly to the scaffold; surely the same pride should teach us to think truly about man's place in the world.<sup>27</sup>

In his book *On Being*, the militant atheist, Peter Atkins, is more measured, but he offers what must be an exemplary exercise in subjecting the foreknowledge of death to such cold reason. Atkins suggests that for us the 'honest and brave approach is to consider what is actually in store for us rather than the hopeful and baseless anticipations of our ancient ancestors.' Thus, he sets out an account of his own end, considering only the material (for that is all there will be to consider) and replete with detailed explanations of what will occur in terms of rates of bodily cooling, flaccidity and *rigour mortis*, the molecular process of decay, lividity, bacterial consumption, odour and so on.<sup>28</sup> Atkins' intention seems genuinely not to frighten, but to perform the exercise that so few of us have the stomach for. He admits it is difficult ('on rereading it, it disturbs me'), but we 'need' to know—actually *know*—what we are destined for. Thus, the exemplar: 'although this is my *post mortem* autobiography, you should be able to adapt it to your own forthcoming demise.'<sup>29</sup>

### RESISTANCE, REGENERATION AND ELECTION

New Atheist characterisations of the relationship between religion and the human condition vary with their polemical intentions. When advocating humanism, their emphasis lies on the celebration of our potential. Religion is presented as the external force that subjugates us and prevents our flourishing. Yet, when attempting to explain the propensity for faith, celebration of our potential is exchanged for the lamenting of human debasement, and religion is not so much the invading force as the enemy we have invited in. These different emphases naturally have differing connotations with regard to how the ability to move beyond religion will be understood. The first sees the embracing of rationalism and humanism as emancipatory, liberating us from constraints imposed from outside ourselves. The second sees rationalism as a form of internal resistance to that which would subvert us from within. The sense that humans have a fatal weakness for supernaturalism implies more than simply that we need to be given the cultural freedom to be scientific naturalists. It implies that we need to overcome something within ourselves in order to *become* atheists. In this discourse, the achievement of atheism



is transformative, a process by which a higher truth is known and basic flawed humanity is transcended. Atheism and rationalism are taken to be the keys to a new life no longer thrall to the instinctive weaknesses of the old.

This is the language of regeneration.

In Christian discourse, regeneration is a spiritual rebirth into a new life, expressive of the connection with God, and contrasting with those who remain spiritually dead and so oppressed by the need to place mental and bodily gratification above spiritual wellbeing. It is a supernatural occurrence, the direct working of God within men and women. An atheist regeneration, of course, cannot be. Nevertheless, the New Atheists present non-believers as having neutralised the supernatural instinct as the most profound and ubiquitous human weaknesses, and so to have progressed to a higher level of honesty and understanding which sets them apart from the majority.

A common claim is that the truth of atheism is, in Dawkins' words, 'life-affirming.'<sup>30</sup> Atheists are not distracted by the instinctive sense that there is something beyond this life to give attention to. So they come to know the enriching truth that life can only be really lived immersed in the world around us. Atheists, then, become able to live more fully. We may all share the same basic responses to what we find in the world, but atheists have come to know their true meaning and so, apparently, feel them more profoundly. They know what believers have yet to learn:

...that what feeds their hearts and minds – love, beauty, music, sunshine on the sea, the sound of rain on leaves, the company of friends, the satisfaction that comes from successful effort – is more than the imaginary can ever give them, and that they should learn to re-describe these things – the real things of this world – as what gives life the poetry of its significance. (Grayling)<sup>31</sup>

The truth of atheism, then, not only allows us to see the world through 'clear eyes' and so to actually *know* it, but also enables us to be *sustained* by it and by the beautiful things that we alone create. Thus atheism is not only life-affirming but 'life-enhancing' (Dawkins). It is a truth that, once internalised, opens the door to a superior life characterised by greater insight, greater sensitivity to wonder and beauty, and a more meaningful experience of what Grayling calls 'the affections of the human heart.' But the same truth takes us even further. Knowing that

nothing will come after, Dawkins tells us, atheists quite literally see life as more ‘precious’ than do believers.<sup>32</sup>

Accepting the truth of atheism also changes the person themselves. It moves them to genuine self-reliance, enabling them to take the harder, but more virtuous path of themselves giving meaning and purpose to their lives. As Dawkins has it, it is the turning point at which humans reach true adulthood. The atheist becomes capable of real honesty, their worldview freed from ‘self-delusion.’ Really seeing and accepting how little we matter in the universe, the atheist achieves a true humility that brings with it intellectual strength. They become a realist, no longer prone to ‘wishful thinking.’ They are gifted fortitude, freed from the ‘whingeing self-pity of those who feel life owes them something’ (both Dawkins).<sup>33</sup> Humility enables them to *be* sustained by the world as it is, and to no longer be petulantly seeking after more. Coming to really know the fact of God’s non-existence hones a superior mind. Atheists, Grayling tells us, have ‘intellectual courage’, being able to overcome the believer’s fear of ‘open-endedness and uncertainty.’ They display the ‘absolute integrity’ and rigour that drives evidentialism, and their intellectual lives testify to their fidelity to reason.<sup>34</sup> Finally, atheists are freed to truly embrace humanism, and in doing so, they come by nature to ‘wish to respect their fellow human beings, to like them, to honour their strivings and to sympathise with their feelings.’ Internalising God’s absence creates the conditions within individuals by which they can begin to genuinely desire human flourishing for nothing but its own sake, and learn how to treat their fellows accordingly.<sup>35</sup>

To see where such discourses can lead we need only look at Peter Boghossian’s *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (2013). He encourages atheists to become ‘street epistemologists’ guiding the believers they encounter towards the state of ‘doxastic openness.’ This is the ‘willingness and ability to revise beliefs’, and to accept the severe limitations on what one can claim to know. The language of the change is the language of being born again:

Doxastic openness occurs at the moment one becomes aware of one’s ignorance; it is the instant one realizes one’s beliefs may not be true.

Whilst gradual, the believer’s progress is to occur as a series of these epiphanies—‘ever-expanding moments of doxastic openness’—until

they envelope the whole intellect.<sup>36</sup> For Christians, being born again is the moment in which doctrines of the faith, which have only been understood theoretically before, become experientially real—the point at which a truth is *known* to which all sense of the world must now be realigned. Spiritual and moral potentials are actuated, and the Christian becomes different, and more than they were. Boghossian's doxastic openness is notably similar. It is the moment at which the wavering believer comes to *know*, rather than just theorise, the extent of their own ignorance: again, a truth to which everything must be realigned. The entire understanding of the world has changed forever, and the (now ex-) believer has been changed also. They have *become* rational, freed from a life shaped by 'absurd propositions', and once more endowed with 'their curiosity and their sense of wonder—both of which were robbed by faith.'<sup>37</sup> In all of this the street epistemologist finds the nobility of their task:

Disabusing others of warrantless certainty, and re-instilling their sense of wonder and their desire to know, is a profound contribution to a life worth living.

Indeed, Boghossian's missionaries can rest assured that they are re-birthing better humans. 'Change minds', he tells them, 'and hearts will follow.'<sup>38</sup>

Two tendencies follow quite naturally from such discourses. Both are commonly identified in criticisms of the New Atheism, and so need only be briefly alluded to here. The first is the slide into evangelism that the sense of being in possession of a saving truth encourages. The New Atheists know the reality of things and would induct believers if only they would open themselves to it. If only, they lament, the religious could see the world as they and their fellow humanists see it. They could be freed from the embarrassment of their 'father-cum-policeman-cum-Father Christmas-cum-magician personal deity' (Grayling) and become partakers of the far more elevated existence atheists have attained. Of believers, Grayling declares, with the familiar tone of evangelical condescension for those yet to be saved: 'they are fellow human beings, and humanists profoundly wish them well; which means too that they wish them to be free, to think for themselves, to see the world through clear eyes.'<sup>39</sup> Second, is the castigation of those taken to be insufficiently committed to the truth, those who have failed to fully internalise it as a life principle and to

completely align themselves to it. Thus, the New Atheism has set out to delegitimise sceptically inclined agnosticism as the resort of those unable to take the final step of declaring themselves atheists and witness for its truth through their lives and conversation. Others who are both scientists and religious are dismissed as ‘compartmentalists.’ Their existence simply cannot testify to any compatibility between the two systems, and so can only be explained through the notion of their (essentially dishonest) dual lives. Still, others who come to question an atheism once held are, of course, backsliders. Should they find religion, and, worse still, declare themselves to have done so, they are apostates.

### BELIEF: THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY HERESY

Evangelism might be considered the ‘positive’ consequence of the sense that there exists a single legitimate worldview from which human flourishing is derived. There is a negative consequence, one that is displayed equally strongly in New Atheist polemic. Claims to a monopoly on truth naturally imply the danger of heresy.

As we have seen, heterodoxy became heresy when it was maintained in the face of correction. The historian of the medieval Inquisitions, Edward Peters, explains:

Since the Truth had been revealed, it could surely be demonstrated. Those who refused to accept demonstrative truth were necessarily considered either as invincibly ignorant or wilfully perverse.<sup>40</sup>

As a culpable act of refusal and stubborn perversity, heresy was clearly differentiated from error: the latter was open to correction, the former had proved that it was not. Accusations of heresy were, then, a response to the quandary presented by the ability of some to disbelieve what those with philosophical authority had assured them was true.

The New Atheists exhibit all of the attitudes of those wrestling with their own heresy quandary. The truths of atheism and scientific naturalism, they believe, are demonstrable. Why, then, should the religious be so perverse? All of the standard justifications for believing in God have, apparently, been conclusively refuted time and again through arguments reproduced widely in books and on the Internet. The newer theist forays into quantum weirdness are revealed as hopelessly misinformed by those who actually know something about it, whilst our ever-increasing

understanding of the brain is showing that apprehensions of transcendence and intuitions of higher meaning must be distrusted. Yet, not only do the faithful continue to believe, but they also stubbornly continue to believe on the same bases as did their forebears. They either cannot see, or they refuse to see the truth of what has been laid out so carefully for them. Worse still, as the New Atheists never tire of pointing out, the religious elevate the notion of faith into a form of virtuous anti-rationalism by which they can quarantine their minds. If science contradicts scripture, and does so convincingly, then strength lies in having the trust in God to dismiss the promptings of your own reason. True faith apparently lies, not in being simply ignorant of science and naturalism, but in being knowingly impervious to them.

It is this turn of mind that makes religion into something akin to a heresy. The intuition that a deity exists may always be overcome through reasoned examination of the (lack of) evidence. Those who will open their minds may be reclaimed for naturalism. But belief based on *faith* is explicitly intransigent and culpable. Consider Dawkins' comments on his hopes for the persuasive impact of *The God Delusion*,

Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination...But I believe there are plenty of open-minded people out there: people whose childhood indoctrination was not too insidious, or for other reasons didn't 'take', or whose native intelligence is strong enough to overcome it. Such free spirits should need only a little encouragement to break free of the vice of religion altogether.<sup>41</sup>

Here, then, the ability to be argued out of their belief has become a litmus test of a person's intrinsic reasonableness (the 'faith-head' versus the 'intelligent' or the 'open-minded'). Those who cannot accept what Dawkins has to tell them to reveal only their stubborn wilfulness, and place themselves beyond the pale. The second can be reached and, indeed, saved. The first cannot. Heresy was never simply a particularly violent struggle between opposing ideas. Instead, it was a reframing of such differences in line with the sense that certain people were alienated from the truth, and some so entirely so that they were unrecoverable. For the New Atheists, it is the religious who are alienated from the all-too appreciable truths of atheism and the purposeless universe.

As we saw, R.I. Moore argues that the emergence of heresy-hunting marked a change in the judicial rationale that was itself born of a contest of authority. The centralising elites in medieval Europe sought to strip away those traditional sources of authority vested in community power and to provide rationales for their own claims. Thus, they identified the new possibility of crimes against abstract notions: crimes that would allow them to arrogate to themselves the responsibility for defending these 'victims.' Perhaps most prominent was the notion that 'orthodoxy' might be offended against. It hardly seems to need pointing out that the current God debate is a contest for the authority to define the nature of our reality, and with it which beliefs ought to have cultural and political influence. Does the New Atheism, then, follow the pattern, creating its own crimes against abstractions? It would seem so. Belief, so far as it is concerned, is not a neutral choice in the free contest of ideas, rather it is a crime against *reason* and against *science*.

The New Atheists appoint themselves the defenders of 'reason' and the cultural prosecutors of the unreasoning. Reason, we are told, is what has gifted us all the intellectual and practical benefits that we enjoy. The triumph of the modern world is the triumph of reason over superstition. Those who reject atheism reject reason in favour of instinct, desire, wishful thinking and the inchoate sense that there is something 'more.' If reason has shown us what humans can be, those who abandon it, then, have, in one sense, betrayed their humanity. Dawkins' Foundation is explicitly aimed at the defence of 'reason', and even declared its aim to research the psychology of 'unreason.' Harris was co-founder of Project Reason, which aimed to promote its exercise in order to erode its opposite. Stenger defines the New Atheism by means of its 'taking a stand' for reason. And so on. But, as Fern Elsdon-Baker points out, all this 'raises the question: who defines "unreason?"'<sup>42</sup> As with the notion of 'orthodoxy', it is a term that implies certitude, and implies that reason is a real objective *something* that can be defended. But in reality, it is a highly nebulous and elastic concept, with what qualifies lying very much in the eye of the beholder. The danger of conceiving of crimes against abstractions is that the will to defend leads to artificial concretisation. The Church's sense that there must be an orthodoxy to protect preceded the canonical definition of what it was, and only then was much that was once acceptable in belief cast aside in the interests of those claiming the authority to do the defining. Similar is the New Atheists' claim to cultural authority through defending reason against the (now) crime of unreason.

The same attitude is displayed with regard to science. The New Atheists are quick to assure us that science is not a list of immutable truths from which we must fashion a new naturalistic creed, yet, they fetishize it as a uniquely powerful system for the attainment of truth, one that is unrivalled in its potential to both emancipate and empower us. In the most unrestrained of their polemics, it is the potential arbiter of all we might truly *know*, its limitations being only those of human application. Whereas its practice might sometimes be flawed and its findings provisional, respect for science—perhaps even for Science—must now apparently be a fundamental human obligation the neglect of which is culpable. Religion offends, not simply because believers doubt specific claims of science concerning the origin of the universe or the evolution of life, but because in doing so they question the authority of Science itself. What gives New Atheist concerns the appearance of anti-heresy is the sense that such questioning actually *affronts* science—again, the sense that there is a Science that *can* be affronted. But they go further. Religion does not only offer an insult. As we have seen, Harris describes the relationship between science and religion as zero-sum. Whatever religion gains culturally or politically is gained at the direct expense of science and is a usurpation of its proper place. The very existence of faith, then, *injures* science. Although variously expressed such an attitude is widely held among the New Atheists, as is its corollary. Affronts to Science by the religious cannot be indulged but must instead be actively policed. As Stenger declares in his book on the incompatibility of science and faith, ‘Those who rely on observation and reason to provide an understanding of the world must stop viewing as harmless those who rely instead on superstition.’ Rather, these guardians of rationalism and science ‘must fight to expunge the fantasies of faith from human thinking.’<sup>43</sup>

What is set out here is a roadmap of some of the discourses the New Atheism shares with religion. It shows a route, beginning at the questions raised by the all-encompassing ‘truth’ of atheism, to the explanation of supernaturalism through human failing and temptation, then to resistance to supernaturalism as the transcending of those failings, and ultimately to evangelism and to the condemnation of those irrevocably alienated from that (now) saving truth. It is only one route through New Atheist discourse along certain of its roads. Entirely different routes are available. There is nothing in atheism that obliges the first turn onto this one, some will avoid it entirely, others will turn off somewhere before

it gets to its unedifying destination. And perhaps most who do travel it will do so whilst simultaneously travelling others in different directions. But these languages are prominent within the New Atheism. The route is there to be followed, and the footprints of many of its leading proponents are to be found on it.

## NOTES

1. Jeff Nall, 'Fundamentalist Atheism and Its Intellectual Failures', *Humanity & Society*, vol. 32 (August) (2008), 263–278; William H. Stahl, 'One-Dimensional Rage: The Social Epistemology of the New Atheism and Fundamentalism', in A. Amarasingam (ed.), *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Lieden: Brill, 2010), 97–108; Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 288–296; Hedges, *I Don't Believe in Atheists*, chapter 3.
2. Nall, 'Fundamentalist Atheism', 266.
3. Stahl, 'One-Dimensional Rage', 100–101.
4. Nall, 'Fundamentalist Atheism', 272–277.
5. *TGA*, 149.
6. *TGD*, 18–19; *TGA*, 134.
7. *Ibid.*, 132–133.
8. Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapters 1–3.
9. *TGD*, 209–210.
10. *UtR*, 160; Jason Long, 'The Malleability of the Human Mind' in Loftus (ed.), *The Christian Delusion*, 70.
11. *TGD*, 212–213.
12. See also *WiG*, 84, 89–90.
13. *TGA*, 96.
14. Long, 'The Malleability of the Human Mind', 68.
15. *GiNG*, 74–80.
16. *UtR*, 114, xii.
17. *GiNG*, 74–75.
18. *UtR*, 147–158.
19. *Ibid.*, 159, author's emphasis.
20. *Ibid.*, 177–179.
21. *TEoF*, 36–39.
22. See for example *TGA*, 226–233.
23. *IDoA*, 2, 13; *GiNG*, 12.
24. *TGA*, 222–227.
25. *TGD*, 396–397.



26. *UtR*, 1–6.
27. *TGD*, 397.
28. Peter Atkins, *On Being: A Scientist's Exploration of the Great Questions of Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 4.
29. *Ibid.*, 64.
30. *TGD*, 405.
31. *AAG*, 63–64, re-used in *TGA*, 257–258.
32. *Ibid.*; *TGD*, 405.
33. *Ibid.*, 404–405.
34. *AAG*, 63; *TGA*, 257.
35. *AAG*, 59–64; *TGA*, 255–258.
36. Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, 51.
37. *Ibid.*, 44, 45, 48, 51.
38. *Ibid.*, 42, 45.
39. *AAG*, 62.
40. Peters, *Inquisition*, 44.
41. *TGD*, 28.
42. Fern Elsdon-Baker, F., *The Selfish Genius: How Richard Dawkins Rewrote Darwin's Legacy* (London: Icon Books, 2009), 164.
43. *GatFoF*, 30.



## The Moderation of the Unfinished Thought: Militancy, Polemical Cavalierism and Atheisms

Finally, let us return to the issue of atheist militancy. In his book *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), the philosopher, Julian Baggini, accepts that there is a ‘salutary lesson’ from history to be borne in mind today:

What happened in Soviet Russia is one of the reasons why I personally dislike militant atheism. When I heard someone recently say that they really thought religious belief was some kind of mental illness and that they looked forward to the time in the future when religious believers would be treated, I could see an example of how militant atheism can lead to totalitarian oppression.

But Baggini is not here taking the easy route of presenting atheist militancy only as someone else’s problem. Rather, he admits that he has ‘a great deal of sympathy’ with the militant view that religion is ‘demonstrably false’, and that believers have often ‘opted out of the usual standards of truth or falsity.’ But, he notes, he is ‘held back from embracing it by a simple methodological principle: avoid dogmatism.’ Baggini, then, accepts that atheism can be compatible with the darker tendencies of human absolutism, and that it is a potential against which even his sense of his own reasonableness must be examined.<sup>1</sup>

Such cautious self-reflection is entirely absent from the New Atheism. Since its proponents acknowledge no way in which non-belief could lead to oppression, they see no need to take the precaution of precisely

delimiting their goals or stating clearly which measures are acceptable in achieving them. The dream of the end of faith can be indulged with scarcely any thought given to what it might cost to make it reality.

For a movement advocating social and political change, the demands of the New Atheism are strikingly nebulous. Religion should be denied unwarranted political influence. It should no longer be offered habitual deference and respect. Moderate religion must take responsibility for fanaticism. Faith should become a private matter carried on only behind the closed doors of a church, or, better yet, the home. The ‘brainwashing’ of children must stop. Believers must become ‘rational.’ Humans must learn to think ‘reasonably’, to avoid superstition and to reach the ‘right’ conclusions. We must become humanists and secularists. We must all develop a greater respect for science. We must all *know* more science.

But a reformism as inchoate as this admits of a myriad of potential views as to what such endpoints might look like in practice and as to which routes to them are acceptable. The demands of the New Atheists are made with a casual, untested assurance of their innate benevolence, and in the apparent belief that the option of discriminatory measures will somehow be automatically self-excluding. They proceed with a polemical cavalierism, as if all of their language and terminology was unquestionably neutral and objective, carrying no possibilities for fluidity of interpretation or implication.

Yet, we know that atheist militancy has existed and still can. To see the cavalier nature of New Atheist polemic, we have only to perform the exercise of, in that knowledge, taking it at face value.

### HOPING FOR THE END OF RELIGION...AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A relatively straightforward means of judging the potential for absolutism within the New Atheism—albeit one curiously lacking prominence in the debate around it—is to consider what end result is held to be *ideal*. This must not be confused with more limited ambitions concerning what might be achievable. Some of the New Atheists are deeply pessimistic as to whether humankind is not too wedded to its ‘delusions’ to give them up entirely.<sup>2</sup> They often restrict themselves to hoping for the spread of atheism and secularisation to shape more open societies free to pursue the benefits of scientific advancement. Yet, does the New Atheism *wish* for the death of religion? Undoubtedly.

We saw in the introduction Sam Harris' demand that science must 'destroy' faith, an effort he sees as integral to future human development. Victor Stenger concludes his *The New Atheism* thus: 'Faith is absurd and dangerous and we look forward to the day, no matter how distant, when the human race finally abandons it.'<sup>3</sup> From A.C. Grayling the sentiment comes laced with hyperbole: to move from religion to atheist humanism 'is like escaping from a furnace to cool waters and green groves. I hope the latter is the destination of all humanity.' For Christopher Hitchens the religious 'enemy' must be 'cleared' from our minds that they may receive science as the arbiter of our knowledge, and art, literature and philosophy as the source of our consolations. Peter Boghossian dreams of unleashing a legion of 'street epistemologists' trained to talk believers out of their faith whenever and wherever they find them.<sup>4</sup> For Michel Onfray a 'new order' *will* be born out of the ongoing demise of the Christian era; it must be captured, not by religion ('the philosophy of nostalgia'), but by the 'atheism of tomorrow.'<sup>5</sup> Harris and Stenger each strike a note that is positively apocalyptic. 'Words like "God" and "Allah"', Harris declares, 'must go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal", or they will unmake our world.'<sup>6</sup> Stenger concludes *God and the Folly of Faith* with an atheist call to (intellectual) arms in defence of our species:

I have an urgent plea to scientists and all thinking people. We need to focus our attention on one goal, which will not be achieved in the lifetime of the youngest of us, but which has to be achieved someday if humanity is to survive: the eradication of foolish faith from the face of this planet.<sup>7</sup>

What is not acknowledged is the active rebranding of atheism here being carried out. It is entirely possible to be an atheist without feeling so discomforted by the very existence of religion as to wish to see it gone, and it is certainly possible to be an atheist without experiencing a sense of post-9/11 civilisational crisis. The spectrum of atheist responses to religion is very wide, albeit most are likely to believe in the superior explanatory power of scientific naturalism and be troubled to varying degrees by what they see as the negative consequences of faith. But this is not the same as believing that all humans are obliged to embrace scientific naturalism, or that religion's harm can only be remedied through its eradication. These positions are clearly beyond the point where atheist humanism and secularism shade into anti-religion proper.

The simple expedient of keeping silent as to the variation in non-believers' attitudes allows the New Atheists to avoid what would otherwise be unavoidable—having to acknowledge the relative belligerence of their own.

It is this which seems to account for an apparently schizophrenic attitude to what is meant by secularism itself. The tendency is epitomised by A. C. Grayling. Secularism, he notes, ought to be welcomed by the religious as the best guarantor of their freedom of worship. The truly secular state is not anti-religious but religion-neutral, demanding only that it be given 'no greater privilege than any other voice in the public square.'<sup>8</sup> Yet, having set out this version of secularism in *The God Argument*, Grayling then immediately offers another description that, if it does not directly contradict what he has said, presents a notably different sense of what it means:

In a truly secular world, one where religion has withered to the relative insignificance of astrology, tarot card divination, health-promotion based on crystals and magnets and other marginal superstition-involving outlooks, an ethical outlook which can serve everyone everywhere, and can bring the world together into a single moral community, will at last be possible. That outlook is humanism.<sup>9</sup>

Secularism in this projected future is envisaged as having created the conditions by which religion has been allowed to fail. Grayling's clear expectation is that, deprived of its financial power and cultural privileges, religion will simply become the preserve of the few most irrational. Secularism will not actively kill religion so much as remove one by one the components of its iron lung and leave it gasping to breathe on its own. Its role will be to clear mental and cultural space into which humanism will move, whilst those remaining believers are culturally quarantined and safely relegated to the status of the merely weird.

It is difficult to read Grayling's ideas without being reminded of the aspirations of the Bolsheviks. As we have seen, they too believed that religion deprived of state support and cultural privilege would collapse under the weight of its own absurdity. So they offered lip service to freedom of conscience because they believed that banning religion would be unnecessary. Once people were finally allowed to see for themselves the obvious advantages of scientific materialism, faith could simply be left to wither away in a contest it could never win. Many atheists seem to

believe versions of this imagined scenario, and it is a logical outgrowth of attempts to answer the questions that atheism provokes. The cultural power of religion is acknowledged but not taken seriously. Faith is instead viewed as a stop-gap only—what humans resort to before they discover science. The survival of belief in modern societies must, therefore, be explained as artificial, a sense that in turn leads readily to the notion that religion has a natural death towards which it can be eased without the resort to active euthanasia. But when pluralism is conceded, not as a means to protect something, but only to hasten its demise, it must be considered strategic rather than principled. If so, then the door has been opened to such pluralism being made conditional upon advancing the goal it is intended to serve. Again and again, the Soviets were frustrated by the unexpected tenacity of religion, and the response of many was to abandon the sense that humans could be trusted with the free exchange of ideas. If Grayling's predictions are wrong and religion does not fall by secularism's wayside, should atheists push for a far more actively destructive approach? The logic is clearly there.

Indeed, once the goal of eradicating religion is acknowledged, then everything short of that must be considered a compromise, with the consequence that issues of respect and tolerance are likely to become constrained by what militant atheists consider the religious to *deserve*. If you have declared that you wish to see another's point of view simply disappear, you have predetermined the impossibility of finding any meaningful common ground and set very real limits on your willingness to engage with them. All that is left is tolerance. Tolerance, that is, in its literal, negative sense—not, as we now tend to take it, the open-minded embracing of multiculturalism, but instead the sufferance of that of which you disapprove. Such tolerance is understood to be a concession, not a right, and so it implies an unequal power relationship between the parties. Even if only in their own minds, the self-consciously tolerant claim authority over those they tolerate.

The New Atheists have already travelled far along this path. Again consider Grayling. Throughout his writings he betrays this casual sense of authority and gives the lie to his self-declared pluralism, being willing to concede to the religious only a magnanimous sufferance of their idiocy. So the believer's reliance on faith is 'ignoble, irresponsible and ignorant, and merits the opposite of respect.'<sup>10</sup> 'Religion itself is the lunatic fringe of human thought', akin to 'believing that there are pixies and gnomes lurking invisibly among the rhododendrons.'<sup>11</sup> The faithful

befuddle their minds ‘in an inspissated gloaming of incense and obfuscation’ and have a ‘pathological metaphysical need’ for absurd myths—a need that ‘is obviously enough not worth discussing.’ The very existence of Theos—a ‘religious “think tank”’—is a notion that ‘has a certain comic quality to it.’<sup>12</sup> Even so, Grayling will fight ‘hard to protect the right of the benighted to the stupidest beliefs.’<sup>13</sup> Yet he envisages only a cultural ghettoisation. The faithful will be allowed to continue ‘getting together in dark buildings to mumble and genuflect and roll their eyes up to heaven’, whilst ‘we shake our heads over them or laugh outright at them for the absurdity of what they do.’<sup>14</sup> It is ‘time to place religion where it belongs—wholly in the private sphere along with other superstitions and foibles.’<sup>15</sup> And in language the connotations of which can scarcely go unnoticed, he hopes for the day when all supernaturalism will be hidden behind closed doors, ‘where such proclivities belong along with wearing the opposite sex’s underwear.’<sup>16</sup> Faith, under the benign care of Grayling’s secularism, should apparently be regarded as a form of intellectual kink, an excess one is free to indulge but would be embarrassed to declare openly.

He is far from alone. Variations on such attitudes are common in the current polemic, and they cannot be dismissed as only the forgivable excesses of a ‘robust’ and ‘vigorous’ challenge to the cultural dominance of faith.

It is a remarkable testament to the lack of self-reflection within the New Atheism that a recent proposal of even greater cultural hostility has been proffered, and greeted, as a ‘friendlier’ approach towards the religious. This is Peter Boghossian’s suggestion that, rather than simply tolerating believers on the condition that they do not make themselves too visible, atheists should treat public space as an appropriate environment in which to seek them out and work upon them. His ‘street epistemologists’ will employ Socratic questioning, a technique whereby beliefs are not directly challenged, but the bases for them are rationally explored by asking how we can know a certain proposition to be true. These ‘interventions’ Boghossian characterises as non-confrontational. Believers will be gently shown that they do not know what they think they know and so introduced to a doubting open-mindedness that lays the ground for unbelief.

But the ‘softness’ is purely strategic. For all the tone of benign concern, there is no pluralism here. Consider the world Boghossian wishes to create. It is based upon a series of assumptions:

1. The more atheists there are, the better the world will be.
2. Atheisation must become an *active* process, *strategically* pursued.
3. The religious are legitimate targets for direct atheisation.
4. All cases of religious belief are equally deserving of 'intervention.'
5. Believers' sense of themselves and their identity is unworthy of consideration or restraint, and may be undermined at any point by an atheist.
6. Atheists have a right, and a duty, to attempt to de-faith others unsolicited.

These assumptions add up to a denial of the right of belief.<sup>17</sup>

Boghossian presents tips for aspiring street epistemologists and examples of his own 'work' as best practice. They are revealing. Street epistemologists are to treat every encounter with a believer as an opportunity to 'intervene.' A casual remark at the check-out of a health food shop or a conversation on neighbouring treadmills at the gym may provide an opening by which a stranger's faith may be subjected to (polite) Socratic questioning and the seeds of doubt planted.<sup>18</sup> But street epistemologists do not simply wait for the tacit invitation of an unguarded declaration of faith. Rather, they actively seek out opportunities, training themselves to be attuned to the possibilities of any situation, and, it seems, learning to disregard inconvenient boundaries of etiquette and privacy. Thus, picking up a friend's daughter from choir practice becomes an opportunity to arrive early at the church and 'deliver interventions to the faithful on their home turf.'<sup>19</sup> Street epistemologists fortunate enough to find themselves on a plane with unreserved seating can scan the cabin for potential quarry and sit themselves next to someone reading a religious text.<sup>20</sup> Observing an intense conversation being carried on in a fast-food restaurant, the street epistemologist can inquire as to what was being discussed and do some quick faith undermining should it turn out to concern religion.<sup>21</sup>

In short, there is to be no public place or situation in which the religious cannot be required to justify their beliefs and submit them to Socratic questioning. At any time they are to be prey to an unsolicited 'benign' interrogation explicitly intended to lessen their faith. However friendly the demeanour of the street epistemologist, their method aims to reshape public space into an environment hostile to the religious; a place where believers ought not to expect to go about their daily business unmolested or with their sense of identity safe from attack.



## THE MODERATION OF THE UNFINISHED THOUGHT

New Atheist moderation with regards to the religious, then, might best be described as provisional. That is, it is the moderation of the unfinished thought. Characterisations of the religious are offered in ways suitable to make an immediate point in the abstract arena of polemic. But finishing the thought must involve considering what these would mean if taken as a practical determinant of believers' place in society. What does it really mean—in society-making terms—to say that the religious are deluded and suffering from mental incapacity (Dawkins)? How should we respond if we think that they genuinely 'cannot rationally participate in the assessment of [their] own behaviour and its consequences' (Dennett)? What if, whilst appearing to share our day-to-day concerns, the religious really are smitten with an eschatological *schadenfreude* (Hitchens)? What place for those with a diminished capacity for true fellow-feeling, their charity a selfish performance aimed at avoiding God's punishment (Grayling)?<sup>22</sup> Such claims are bandied about by the New Atheists as if the discriminatory potential implicit within them need never be taken account of. Yet, if taken seriously, they all, quite logically, raise questions as to just how far the religious can be trusted with the freedoms and responsibilities we allow citizens on the understanding that they are mature, rational and good-willing. Freedoms and responsibilities, that is, we reserve the right not to give, or to take away, when they are not.

Consider the argument commonly made that faith represents a continuation into adulthood of the natural credulity of children. Dawkins has set out the theory repeatedly since the 1990s, and other New Atheists now seem to feel that they can simply restate it as fact.<sup>23</sup> Human offspring, Dawkins suggests, have evolved an absolute faith in what their elders tell them which enables them to greatly reduce the potentially dangerous need to learn by trial and error. But the trust mechanism cannot distinguish between the statements made by adults, and so it treats all as equally authoritative, including those concerning an unseen entity who created and orders the universe.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as 'native teleologists' who first explore the world by asking what all things are 'for', children are peculiarly vulnerable to the notion of created order, and so to infection by religion.<sup>25</sup>

In *The God Delusion*, the evolutionary observation is morally neutral. Yet elsewhere Dawkins slides rather effortlessly into judgementalism. In *Unweaving the Rainbow* he is explicit as to the 'vice' in question:

My contention is that trusting credulity may be normal and healthy in a child but it can become an unhealthy and reprehensible gullibility in an adult. Growing up, in the fullest sense of the word, should include the cultivation of a healthy scepticism.<sup>26</sup>

Thus the potential smallness of the discursive step from the scientized discussion of ‘psychological pedomorphosis’ to characterising the religious *as children*. It is a step readily taken, as demonstrated in an interview of 2006:

One major difference between Santa Claus and God, obviously, is that no adult believes in Santa Claus, and unfortunately a great many adults do believe in God. Its about time they grew up, and toss God aside at about the same age as they toss Santa Claus aside.<sup>27</sup>

The religious, Dawkins tells us, borrowing from Isaac Asimov, are those who refuse to abandon ‘a security blanket, a thumb to suck, a skirt to hold.’<sup>28</sup> The ‘infantilism’ of faith, and the shame of the religious adult’s supposed preference for ‘comforting fairy tales’, is a recurrent theme in New Atheist polemic.<sup>29</sup>

But the social connotations of such claims are so obvious that the use of the language of infantilism can only be either calculated or cavalier.

All human societies consider immaturity to be socially and politically disqualifying. In Britain, for example, we do not consider under-eighteens sufficiently responsible to exercise a vote, get married without parental consent, have a mortgage or own property, enter into any kind of contract, sit on a jury, be a political candidate, pursue civil court action without a ‘litigant friend’, choose to donate blood, platelets or bone marrow, buy tobacco, alcohol, knives or fireworks or enter a betting shop. We restrict, and so protect, the young because we understand that they are mentally unready to negotiate the adult world. We deny them freedoms and spare them responsibilities, and we do not consider them qualified to exercise power over us. However precious children are to us, however joyous and hopeful our sense of their future potential, they are socially defined by what they lack.

The New Atheists commonly decry the way in which the dominance of religious culture has led to non-believers being described, and so understood, only in terms of what *they* lack, this time of a sense of God. Where faith is the norm, ‘a-theism’ marks out not simply a different but

‘an incomplete being’ (Michel Onfray).<sup>30</sup> But when disbelief in God is offered as a marker of the development of a fully adult intellect, then the religious also become defined as incomplete, and as incomplete in such a way as implies forms of social disqualification. The original New Atheists have not taken the step of making this fully explicit. Peter Boghossian, however, wants the notion of the ‘Adult Table’ to be used as one of the means to stigmatise religion out of the public sphere. The correct response to opinions expressed only on the basis of religious faith is, apparently, ‘Go to the Kid’s Table, this is a conversation for adults.’ ‘Those at the Kid’s Table’, Boghossian declares, ‘can talk about anything they’d like, but they have no adult responsibilities and no voice in public policy.’<sup>31</sup>

### RELIGION AS CHILD ABUSE

The reliance on the moderation of the unfinished thought becomes even more pointedly apparent in one of the New Atheism’s most controversial claims: that a religious upbringing constitutes a form of psychological abuse.<sup>32</sup> Believers, it is claimed, ‘brainwash’ (Grayling) their children and take advantage of their naivety.<sup>33</sup> They retard intellectual development and force upon children religious identities that later need to be actively (and often very painfully) escaped if they are to enjoy the freedom of self that the rest of us take for granted.<sup>34</sup> The number of those so ‘maimed’, Hitchens notes, is unknown, but it must be very great since we need not doubt that religion has always sought to ‘practice’ upon the young.<sup>35</sup> Dawkins quotes approvingly the claim of the psychologist, Nicholas Humphrey, that the issue is one of the defence of human rights:

...children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense, and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children’s teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.<sup>36</sup>

No anti-religionist can be unaware that in using the language of child abuse they appropriate for their polemic the especial revulsion that such holds for their readers. It is an accusation clearly intended to cut through the potential indifference of non-believers to what the religious do so long as they leave the rest of us alone.

And yet, despite the seriousness of their accusations, not one of the New Atheists proposes addressing directly the psychological abuse they identify. Dawkins notes vaguely that it would be preferable for parents to teach their children not what to think but how. He hopes that school courses in comparative religion might subvert the truth claims of religious parents, and suggests we should wince at terms such as ‘Catholic child’ or ‘Muslim child’, creating a new *faux pas* with which to embarrass the faithful into change. Hitchens offers nothing beyond the wistful observation that if ‘religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world.’<sup>37</sup> In barely more substantial terms, Grayling notes that it would simply be ‘far better’ if no child were exposed to any religious doctrine. We must ‘challenge religion to leave children alone’, he declares, but immediately accepts that ‘committed parents and their churches would no doubt continue to propagandise the young.’ Ultimately, then, he accepts the continuation of what he has explicitly labelled ‘a form of child abuse, and a scandal.’<sup>38</sup>

But does the accusation not make the case more urgent than this? Can we talk of child abuse without talking also of legislation?

A number of possibilities follow entirely consistently from the New Atheist position. Should secular governments remove children from religious parents? The principle is long established that in cases of serious abuse the parents’ interests are superseded by those of the child. So how serious is the child abuse of a religious upbringing? Should we instead constrain the mechanisms by which religious identity is imposed? Faith schools, of course, must go, but then so might churches, synagogues and mosques, religious summer camps, after-school clubs and home groups. Or should we instead introduce a minimum age for attendance at a place of worship? Why offer children in danger of religious psychological abuse less protection than we currently insist upon for a trip to the cinema? Should we require those wanting to join a church to complete courses in scientific naturalism and atheist humanism, forcing them to inform their decision and so earn, in Dawkins’ words, the ‘privilege’ of credulity?<sup>39</sup> Should we ban all religious images from public places and media on the basis that, not unlike depictions of smoking, they promote and normalise to the young an apparently injurious lifestyle?

If these measures strike New Atheists or anti-religionists as extreme, or even ridiculous, then that tells us a great deal. Those who identify a religious upbringing as child abuse but are not sufficiently concerned to

consider what substantive actions they might take to prevent it—those whose response amounts to little more than simply wishing it away—either do not take child abuse seriously, or were not serious when they labelled it child abuse.

But were others to take the New Atheists *at their word*, and to advocate the criminalisation of religious indoctrination of children, this would not be a betrayal of the logic of their polemics. Once the language of child abuse is deployed, such advocacy might seem a strong response, but not an irrational one. The New Atheists have provided a basis for questioning the fitness of believers to be trusted with the young. Indeed, Darrel Ray, in *The God Virus*, argues explicitly that ‘infection’ with religion dissolves parenting ability. ‘Rational parents’, he tells us, ‘want to raise well-educated and well-balanced children with full logical and critical faculties. But once infected, no parent is rational.’ Instead the religious ‘can become virtual slaves to the virus’, and the ‘greatest fear of an infected parent is that he or she will fail in sufficiently infecting the child.’ Thus their willingness to indoctrinate their children with myths, to deny them lifestyle choices and even to terrorise them with threats of eternal punishment.<sup>40</sup> Ray seeks to de-normalise religious parenting and suggest a profound separation between the non-believer’s apparently selfless attempt to *enable* the individuality of their child and the believer’s concern to deny that individuality and *shape* their child in the interests of something else.

#### VIRUSES OF THE MIND, PUBLIC HEALTH CRISES AND CONTAINMENT PROTOCOLS

Ray’s argument, in turn, leads us to perhaps the most telling example of the moderation of the unfinished thought. That is the influence of Dawkins’ claim that we might understand religion as a ‘virus of the mind.’ When young, he tells us, our brains are conditioned to soak up information and culture, absorbing vast amounts at remarkable speed. Like a computer that cannot itself determine the value or safety of the code it copies onto its hard drive, the young human brain absorbs without discernment or protection and so is open to ‘infection’ by fallacious and even dangerous ideas.<sup>41</sup> When he first floated the idea in the early 1990s, Dawkins’ critics immediately pointed out that no science lay behind such a claim and that the analogy itself appeared to have been

consciously chosen to hijack medical language as a tool to stigmatise religion with images of the contamination of 'otherwise pure minds.'<sup>42</sup> Dawkins was unapologetic,<sup>43</sup> and the theory reappears unchanged in *The God Delusion*.<sup>44</sup> It remains a prominent part of New Atheist discourse, taken seriously by writers such as Ray, Craig James, Dennett, Stenger and Boghossian.

The exact status of the 'God virus' continues to be somewhat unclear. Is it simply a metaphor? Or do the New Atheists believe that, in some real way, minds have actually been infected by religious ideas? Some state explicitly that the God virus is metaphorical,<sup>45</sup> yet, as Alister McGrath notes, once the discussion progresses it always 'seems to then assume ontological substance.'<sup>46</sup> Thus Ray claims to be taking us 'on a tour of religion using the metaphor of viruses.'<sup>47</sup> But the God virus is then described in starkly literalist terms. Religions do not behave *like* an infection, they 'infect people' as 'hosts', 'take over' their mental and physical functions, and 're-engineer' them to be 'vectors' (carriers) for the God virus.<sup>48</sup> Ray has gone further than most of the New Atheists, but not that much further. It might not be going too far to suggest that the New Atheism even plays upon the indefiniteness of the God virus, exploiting the disturbing power of the image whilst always having available the retreat of 'its only a metaphor.' Certainly the lack of caution they all display is striking, as is the irony of the use of such literalist language by those whose very point is to persuade us that ideas (memes) replicate, spread and *mutate* beyond any human control. Whatever we ourselves make of the theory of memetics, it is notable that those selling it to us seem blithely unconcerned that their 'religion as virus' metaphor may spawn a literalist 'religion is a virus' meme regardless of their intentions.

What follows, then, from the sense that religion must be considered an invasive and parasitic agent feeding off our communities, and from the belief that its presence or otherwise determines societal health? These questions are raised by John Cornwall in his response to Dawkins, *Darwin's Angel* (2007). 'The analogy of infection', he notes, 'suggests certain unspoken remedies, antidotes, and solutions', whilst believers themselves are depersonalised and reduced to the status of an epidemiological problem.<sup>49</sup> In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett had already declared that dangerous<sup>50</sup> fundamentalist religions, and indeed religionists, must be 'caged' whilst the rational 'do our best to disable the memes they fight for.'<sup>51</sup> Now, Cornwall points out, Dawkins has abandoned any distinction, claiming that all forms of faith are part of the

same epidemic, diagnosed by ‘we doctors.’<sup>52</sup> The disturbing precedents that such language summons to memory should be obvious. It was the ability to see others as disease agents within the national body that fed Nazi bio-politics with its ideas of ‘cleansing’ and racial ‘therapies.’ Dawkins, Cornwall is sure, is well-meaning but has failed to consider the potentials of his theory, a problem when we are left ‘in little doubt...that should you ever acquire political influence or actual power, your policies would inevitably follow from your vision of faith as a disease.’<sup>53</sup>

Cornwall’s warnings have gone entirely unheeded, and one book, in particular, reveals starkly the resulting strain on the presumption of moderation. In *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, Peter Boghossian asserts not only that ‘we must reconceptualise faith as a virus of the mind’, but that it must really be treated ‘as a public health crisis.’<sup>54</sup> He is adamant that faith is ‘an unclassified cognitive illness’, arbitrarily exempted from professional classification and so denied the development (and funding) of treatments ‘designed to rid subjects of the faith affliction.’<sup>55</sup> Boghossian apparently really does believe that the religious are unwell. What, then, of his juxtaposition of that claim with his assertions (backed up with approving quotations of Ray’s pseudo-virology) that there exist mental ‘toxins’ with which the mind can be infected? Does Boghossian believe that cultural ‘memes’ produce actual malfunctions in the brain? The rhetoric is certainly alarmist.

Taking his cue from Dennett, Boghossian also tells us that ‘people infected with faith don’t think of it as a malady, but as a gift, even a blessing.’ They have no means of recognising that they are, in fact, mentally ill. At the same time, society conspires to overlook their symptoms as it finds virtue in the notion of simply having beliefs and standing up for them.<sup>56</sup> Atheists must reform our cultures such that they expose symptoms rather than hide them, whilst the religious, like addicts or those with self-destructive disorders, should be subject to ‘interventions.’<sup>57</sup> The implications are striking. It is for atheists to determine the best interests of those whose condition has rendered them incapable of doing so for themselves, since atheists alone have sufficient mental and epistemological fitness to actually *be* atheists. In short, it is for atheists to determine who is healthy and who is not.

Such notions shade easily into the language of social hygiene, especially when the illness in question is taken to undermine the correct functioning of society, and when attention moves beyond those already unwell to focus also the supposed insecurity of healthy individuals and

communities. Boghossian displays both concerns. Our cultures, he claims, are prey to the wide influence of powerful vectors, from clerics to churches to religious lobby groups, all aiming to carry the God virus as far as they can, whilst '[i]t's disturbing that many people who have no faith are untroubled by the possibility of their own infection.'<sup>58</sup> The true power of medical analogy is, of course, that it taps into humans' deep sense of the precariousness of health itself. Boghossian would have us learn to fear our cultures as 'epistemically' unsanitary, dangerous and in need of cleansing. Thus, he is led to adopt the very terminology predicted by Cornwall. As a 'containment protocol', he declares, we must 'treat faith like any other epidemiological crisis: contain and eradicate.' 'Future generations', he tells us, 'will likely view the eradication of epistemological contagions in the same way that previous generations viewed the importance of eradicating smallpox and polio.'<sup>59</sup>

Yet, here something interesting happens. As Cornwall suggests, to invoke the image of an epidemic is to call to mind a form of crisis in which the suspension of human rights is considered acceptable in the interests of public safety. Boghossian, however, explicitly shies away. Religion, he suggests, must be countered by a long-term cultural inoculation, in which we must 'promote, laud and even glamorise reliable epistemologies.'<sup>60</sup> But he is explicit that this strategy is a compromise. Ideally, he tells us, the carriers of the God virus themselves ought to be targeted for 'epistemological sanitization':

Just as society has established mechanisms to deal with contagions, pathogens, and infectious diseases that affect our water, air, and food supply... there's also an *urgent need* for large-scale interventions in educational systems, houses of worship and other institutions that promote failed epistemologies.<sup>61</sup>

Yet such large-scale sanitisations cannot take place. 'Serious ethical, constitutional and free speech' considerations apparently make them impossible, and hence it becomes necessary to pursue the more positive cultural strategy.<sup>62</sup>

What are we to make of this? If Boghossian's preference would be for large-scale cultural sanitisation programmes were they ethically acceptable, we are entitled to ask what these would look like? He avoids being explicit but his chosen analogy would seem to be eloquent enough: no one attempts to deal with cryptosporidium in the water supply or



salmonella in the food chain by politely and patiently trying to persuade these pathogens to be something else. Moreover, we are also entitled to ask why the ethical considerations Boghossian identifies should be paramount, and indeed if, under the circumstances he describes, they are actually ethical at all? If the religion infection is really so virulent and the public health crisis so 'urgent', should we not openly consider whether it is ethical to allow such harm to persist when we might prevent it by acts of state? Such debates take place continually over public health issues such as tobacco, recreational drugs and obesity. Why should the contagion of religion be any different? Would any who took Boghossian at his word and refused to shy away from advocating the forced 'santization' of churches be betraying the logic of his crisis discourse?

The New Atheists commonly demand that believers stop hiding behind their 'perfumed smokescreen' and admit that, even if they are themselves inclined to moderation, an absolutist potential lies in the tenets of their faith ready to move the less good-willing. Asking Boghossian, or any other New Atheist, to abandon their reliance on the moderation of the unfinished thought and to acknowledge the absolutist potential of their own ideology and the discourses they use to express it, is surely only to require the same level of honesty.

There has only been space here to examine a handful of those New Atheist discourses that hold within them the strong potential for absolutism, stigmatisation, and, were they to be taken far enough, outright discrimination. There are numerous others. Its advocates consistently tell us that the New Atheism fights with words rather than pyres, bombs and beheadings. This is true, and the difference between it and the most violent forms of religious fundamentalism must never be forgotten or downplayed. Moreover, as with the quasi-religious tendencies we examined in the last chapter, it must always be held in view that its militant discourses are one aspect of a movement that is also characterised by a wide range of languages of compassion, humane respect, freedom and the promotion of human flourishing. But none of this detracts from the reality of its more absolutist tendencies, or from the danger that results from the unexamined presumption of moderation and inherent benevolence.

Atheists cannot demand that the religious acknowledge the dark side of their collective past, and what it suggests about their own current potentials, without being prepared to do the same. If non-religion

is to be a force for political and social change, and a serious contributor to the debate over religious fundamentalism, it must develop its ethics based upon the recognition of the existence not simply of atheism, but of atheisms. That is, its advocates must accept that atheism has never been only an absence of belief. It has always implied the real problematisation of religion and the religious, and a wide spectrum of extreme and moderate political responses have followed and will continue to follow from this with equal logicity. The responsibility of the campaigning atheist is to identify where on the spectrum they lie and which atheism is theirs. This should not be as a *mea culpa* to theist accusations. I do not argue that atheism, even in its more militant 'New' form, is naturally inclined to fulfil the worst expectations of its theist critics. Rather, it should be to avoid cavalier assumptions of a moral superiority that allow history to be ignored, and that encourage complacency and a lack of self-reflection as to the potential consequences of claiming anti-religion as the key to societal improvement. It is only by recognising the absolutist potential of certain forms of atheism that those who would wish to can work towards maximising its progressiveness. The past does indeed show us what atheism can be. It is a lesson worth learning and applying to ourselves.

## NOTES

1. Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88–89, 104.
2. TGV, 233–234; James, *The Religion Virus*, 170.
3. TNA, 244; see also GatFoF, 30, 322.
4. Harris, 'Science must Destroy Religion', 153; TNA, 244; TGA, 8; GiNG, 283; AMfCA, 15–18; Jack Huberman, *The Quotable Atheist: Ammunition for Nonbelievers, Political Junkies, Gadflies and Those Generally Hell-Bound* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), vi.
5. IDoA, 38–39.
6. TEoF, 14, see also 22, 26, 227.
7. GatFoF, 322.
8. AAG, 45.
9. TGA, 138.
10. AAG, 16.
11. A. C. Grayling, 'A Force for Evil', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2007, [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac\\_grayling/2007/07/a\\_force\\_for\\_evil.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac_grayling/2007/07/a_force_for_evil.html); see also id., 'The Curse of Religion', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jul/01/religion-euthanasia>;

- id., 'Children of God?', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/nov/28/religion-children-innateness-barrett>; *TGA*, 135.
12. *AAG*, 31–35.
  13. A. C. Grayling, 'Halting Progress', *The Guardian*, 9 January 2007, [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac\\_grayling/2007/01/an\\_obscentiy\\_against\\_human\\_rig.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac_grayling/2007/01/an_obscentiy_against_human_rig.html).
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  18. *AMfCA*, 57–59, 112–117.
  19. *Ibid.*, 88–92.
  20. *Ibid.*, 96, note 1.
  21. *Ibid.*, 92–95.
  22. *GiNG*, 56–57; *BtS*, 251–256; *WiG*, p. 72.
  23. Dawkins, 'Viruses of the Mind', in his *A Devil's Chaplain: Selected Essays by Richard Dawkins* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 151–172 (originally published in Bo Dahlbom (ed.), *Dennett and His Critics* (1993)); id., *UtR*, 139–144; *TGD*, 203–208; *TGA*, 39–40.
  24. *TGD*, 203–205.
  25. *Ibid.*, 211–214, 219; see also *BtS*, 108–114.
  26. *UtR*, 142–143; *TGD*, 205.
  27. Richard Dawkins, interview with Adrienne Burke, 'Richard Dawkins: The God Delusion', *Science & the City Podcast*, New York Academy of Sciences, 6 October 2006, <http://www.nyas.org/Publications/Media/PodcastDetail.aspx?cid=a4bb550a-82b2-4a95-8ce8-a495c35ae0c0>.
  28. *TDG*, 20, the same quote is used in *UtR*, 142; see also *TGD*, 390–391.
  29. *GiNG*, 64; *AAG*, 43; *TGD*, 6; *IDoA*, 1; Richard Dawkins, 'Richard Dawkins' Thought for the Day', *BBC Radio 4*, 14 August 2002, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/features/thought\\_for\\_day\\_dawkins.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/reports/archive/features/thought_for_day_dawkins.shtml); *TDG*, 403–404.
  30. *IDoA*, 20.
  31. *AMfCA*, 212–213.
  32. *AAG*, 26; *WiG*, 94; id., *The Form of Things*, 112; id., 'A Force for Evil'; *TDG*, 358–362; *BtS*, 322.

33. *WiG*, 94; *AAG*, 26.
34. *TDG*, 366–367; *BtS*, 324.
35. *GiNG*, 217; *TGD*.
36. Quoted in *TGD*, 367.
37. *Ibid.*, 367; *GiNG*, 220.
38. *TGA*, 39; *AAG*, 26; *WiG*, 94; *id.*, *The Form of Things*, 112–113; *id.*, ‘Ghettos of Superstition’, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2007, [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac\\_grayling/2007/09/ghettos\\_of\\_superstition.html](http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ac_grayling/2007/09/ghettos_of_superstition.html).
39. *TGD*, 367.
40. *TGV*, 93–96.
41. Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain*, 151–172.
42. McGrath, *Dawkins’ God*, 135–136, author’s emphasis.
43. Dawkins, *A Devil’s Chaplain*, 137.
44. *TGD*, 216, 218–219; McGrath & McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, 41.
45. *TGD*, 216; *GatFoF*, 124; *TGV*, 21.
46. McGrath & McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, 41.
47. *TGV*, 20–21.
48. *Ibid.*, 23, 25–27, 55.
49. Cornwall, *Darwin’s Angel*, 141–142.
50. ‘Dangerous’ here refers not only to the violence of fundamentalism. Dennett lists creationism among those religious memes that must be caged.
51. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 515–516.
52. Cornwall, *Darwin’s Angel*, 143–144.
53. *Ibid.*, 141, 144–145.
54. *AMfCA*, 216–217.
55. *Ibid.*, 208, 221–222.
56. *Ibid.*, 208–210.
57. *Ibid.*, 209.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*, 217, 231.
60. *Ibid.*, 217–218, 232.
61. *Ibid.*, 217, my emphasis.
62. *Ibid.*

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